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Emerging Black Masculinities in Hip Hop

by

Windsor Ludy Jordan Jr.

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

American Studies

Lehigh University

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Thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in American Studies.

Emerging Black Masculinities in Hip Hop  
Windsor Ludy Jordan Jr.

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Date Approved

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James Braxton Peterson

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## ABSTRACT

This work explores the newest generation of black male Hip Hop artist and how their work challenges hypermasculinity and hegemonic masculinity that so dominated gangsta rap of the 1990s and earlier cultural expressive forms like the black badman ballads of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through close readings of the work of artist such as Big K.R.I.T., J. Cole, Kendrick Lamar, Wale, Lil' B and others I find that artist of this new generation are challenging normative masculinity by disturbing the binaries upon which hegemony and hypermasculinity rest. This is achieved in a broad fashion by entering liminal spaces that allow for the collapse of good and evil, men and women, and heterosexual and homosexual. More specifically these artists challenge normative masculinities by assuming female positionalities, challenging heteronormativity, and challengeing gangsta as authentic black masculinity. The result is that space is being made for emerging Hip Hop masculine subjectivities to be realized.

## **Introduction**

In response to racial and gender oppression black men have forged expressive cultural practices that mean to at once respond to long-standing racist depiction of black bodies, allow for alternatives sites of masculinity, and create their own sign of masculine power. My work here attempts to describe the newest iteration of this practice within the Hip Hop context through a close reading of Hip Hop's next generation of black male rappers. Overall, I argue that artists such as Big K.R.I.T., Lil' B, J. Cole, Kendrick Lamar, Lupe Fiasco, and others are challenging normative assumptions regarding Hip Hop's black masculinity even as they dwell in familiar tropes of homophobia and misogyny. These emerging masculinities are not, in their totality, progressive. In other words they do not in full seek to reject misogyny, violence, or homophobia. However, black male rappers are choosing different ways to navigate the complicated nature of black masculinity that illustrate its dynamic and multifaceted nature. Overall this new era of rappers is challenging hypermasculinity found in gangsta rap and in earlier forms such as the black badman ballads and toast of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by collapsing binaries upon which hegemonic norms depend.

The badman, typified in the late 1800s by the character Stagger Lee, offered a creative hypermasculine response to over policed and socially and economically marginalized working-class black communities. Stagger Lee ballads of working-class, gritty roots defied white supremacy that depicted black males as docile and lazy; and also resisted narratives of respectability within the black community. The anti-authority values found in folk characters like Stagger Lee represent the voice of disaffected, marginalized black males who sought power and



dignity in a hero outlaw figure who didn't back down from anyone.<sup>1</sup> That violence and sexual power were apart of this character is almost to be expected given where the axis of power resides in the American male context. By moving closer to hegemonic notions of masculine power black working-class males hoped to assert their own sign of masculinity that offered a defiant, fearless, heroic figure.

Gangsta rap would revise these characteristics and speak for the equally economically marginalized and over-policed black inner cities of the 1980s. Like Stagger Lee and his contemporaries, gangsta rap would offer a defiant heroic outlaw figure that would both defy white supremacy while also affirming white supremacist stereotypes of black deviance and criminality. Gangsta rap also rejected assimilationist and respectability narratives of its day. Gangsta rap realized the same protest against white supremacy as that of the badman, but did so with an even more nihilistic zeal that laughed in the face of danger.<sup>2</sup> Both these forms relied on hegemonic masculinity that found its power in a particular hypermasculine approach marked by aggressive sexuality and violence. This new era of black male rappers still often work within these hegemonic norms, which is why it is so compelling when and how they choose to break them. I hope to expose these ruptures or breaks as important steps in collapsing the longstanding binaries that uphold hegemonic systems.

The argument I advance moves beyond dialectic conversations about “underground” vs. “commercial” Hip Hop where the purity of former and the corruption of the latter are assumed.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007) and Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a “G” Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 104.

Rather, I seek to ask what productive nature do particular masculine subjectivities have for particular socio-historical periods and actors in those periods? Undergirding this question is the assumption that social actors at times forge symbolic characters that both challenge and affirm hegemonic norms, and still remain productive.

The first chapter outlines the nature of hegemonic masculinity, an unattainable goal for all men, and “Other” masculinities are at the bottom. Hegemonic masculinity is informed by white supremacist values that have normalized a particular masculinity as the ideal, to which all others are subordinate. This hierarchy has the affect of creating spaces where “real” men reside and another space for “Other” masculinities. However the theory of hegemonic masculinity also offers the opportunity for the interplay between dominant and subordinate forms, because hegemony relies on a “Self” and “Other” dichotomy and therefore leaves open space for a challenge to hegemony through the collapse of binaries.

Even within hegemonic forms, marginalized social actors can assert meanings through disturbing the binaries hegemonic system depend upon. In this way, marginalized groups gain agency within hegemonic systems through a negotiation of power. This approach seeks to understand black male cultural expressive practice as not over-determined by white supremacist ideals, but a continuous struggle of simultaneous wins and losses over the terrain of power.<sup>3</sup> As a result black men created their own symbols, the black badman of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and then gangsta rap of the most recent era, to speak back against gender stereotyping, and social and economic marginalization.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Winant, *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparisons* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994)

<sup>4</sup> John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

The second chapter is evidence for the theories advanced in the first. I take as my guiding texts John Roberts' (1989) From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom which traces the development of the badman folk character; and Eithne Quinn's (2005) Nuthin' but a G' Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap, who connects the earlier badman to his predecessor -- gangsta rap. I take a close look at the black badman folk character as well as gangsta rap as example of expressive cultural productions that navigate hegemonic power. Marginalized economically and socially, over-policed black men turned to hypermasculine expressive forms to register their dissatisfaction and oppose white supremacy. In this way both forms were influenced by hegemonic masculinity that was marked by misogyny, homophobia, and a narrow conception of masculinity. However, these expressive practices also offered challenges to assimilationist narratives of black respectability and white supremacist iconography even as they worked in hypermasculine forms. Both these expressive forms induced pride, power, and unity among black men and also registered their deep disaffection with the conditions of their lives.<sup>5</sup> These symbolic characters, generally down and out men that rise to prominent figures, are just as feared as they are revered. For black men in both eras, these cultural expressions represent a form of power in the face of deep and persistent sentiments of powerlessness against institutional racism and gender discrimination. The interplay between dominant racial stereotypes and the need enact a resistant cultural representations, is what is at stake when thinking about black masculine expressive practices.

The final chapter engages the contemporary period where I will conduct close readings of the work of California artist Kendrick Lamar and Mississippi artist Big K.R.I.T. as well as some

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<sup>5</sup> Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

of their peers in order to advance a theory of emerging black masculinities in Hip Hop. In this new era where corporate influences are generally read to over-determine the art form and perpetuate the worst stereotypes of black Americans, I posit that these artists are challenging normative masculinity by disturbing the binaries upon which hegemony and hypermasculinity rest. This is achieved in a broad fashion by entering liminal spaces that allow for the collapse of good and evil, men and women, heterosexual and homosexual etc. In the work of Lamar and K.R.I.T. good and evil are not seen as separate worlds, but are conceived as a tension within one being that must be balanced. On both his studio album *good kid, m.A.A.d city* and his mixtape *Section.80* Lamar takes on female subjectivities that question the separation between male and female, so crucial to hegemonic masculinity.<sup>6</sup> California rapper Lil' B's album *I'm Gay* challenges normative sexualities even as he advances homophobia. All these artists and more are upending assumptions regarding authentic black masculinities in Hip Hop by entering the space in between, the liminal, allowing for challenges to hegemonic or normative black masculinity, and opening spaces for emerging male identities.

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<sup>6</sup> Other artists, such as Kanye West have also spoken from female positionalities. Most notably in the song "All Falls Down" from his Studio Debut *College Dropout* (2001).

## CHAPTER ONE: Hegemonic Masculinity

This thesis is largely a work about representation and symbol rather than real-life gangsters or bad men. In her approach to reading the pimp or the mack figure within gangsta rap, Eithne Quinn (2000) stresses the need for critical scholarship that focuses on the emblematic, symbolic, and figurative meanings of these representations<sup>7</sup>. For instance, Roger D. Abrahams (1970) notes that the pimp has become important as a symbolic referent for guile and wit and not only the deplorable act of selling women's bodies for money. "Because of the style of his profession", Abrahams writes, the pimp is "now used to refer to any 'smart' person"<sup>8</sup>. This approach attempts to understand the complexities, ambiguities, metadiscourses at work in such figures. In this way, the *figure* of the pimp becomes a symbol of deceptive cleverness that invokes earlier black expressive animal-trickster figures such as the "Signifying Monkey", who wins over his nemesis, the stronger and more powerful Lion, with clever wordplay.

The toast is often interpreted as a racial fable in which the dominant white character is outdone by the superior guile of the black protagonist: a discursive reversal of historically prevailing power relationships, and indeed of the racist stereotype which casts black as "brawn over brains."<sup>9</sup>

Robin D.G. Kelley (1996) makes a similar observation about early gangsta rap. Kelley writes that some of gangsta raps' violent lyrics are boisterous rhymes of braggadocios one-ups-manship and are not meant to be taken seriously. Although, all descriptions of violence in rap music are

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<sup>7</sup> Quinn, 117.

<sup>8</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (New York: Adline, 1970), 263.

<sup>9</sup> Eithne Quinn, "'Who's the Mack?': The Performativity and Politics of the Pimp Figure in Gangsta rap," *Journal of American Studies* 34, no. 1 (2000): 119.

not metaphors, Kelley makes the case that, “exaggerated and invented boasts of criminal acts should sometimes be regarded as part of a larger set of signifying practices”<sup>10</sup>. I will explore in some depth both the black badman ballads and toasts and their successor gangsta rap in the following chapter, however, for now it is important to understand that both these forms rely on playful use of language and style that Kelley, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988) and others have deemed central to black expressive practices.

Postmodern scholarship has privileged the “style of representation” and “performativity of language”<sup>11</sup> as important terrains for discourse, and it is with this angle in mind that I approach black badman ballads, gangsta rap, and emerging black masculine Hip Hop artists. This approach privileges these black expressive practices as creating emblematic figures in a struggle for hegemonic power, and highlights their productive nature within that context. Popular culture figures are not created in a vacuum, but are born from a cultural context that reveals relations of power. By focusing on the black badman and gangsta rappers as representations and symbols critical insight is gained in how these figures are used within a hegemonic struggle for power.

The following chapter outlines the parameters of hegemonic masculinity as a product of white supremacy and the iconography of black Americans that was produced within that context. The racialized sign of debased, feared, backward, “blackness” would be the “Other” to the pure, rational, and civility represented by whiteness, the “Self”. This ideology would inform centuries of American popular culture that black American expressive cultural practices would then navigate.

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<sup>10</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 190.

<sup>11</sup> Quinn, 2000, 117.

## Hegemony

Writing about the racial order in the post-Civil Right era, Howard Winant (1994) argues that the social status quo and racial domination are maintained through hegemonic processes where by norms are established and re-enforced through the incorporation of oppositional or marginalized discourse. Winat writes that,

Under hegemonic conditions opposition and difference are not repressed, excluded, or silenced (at least not primarily). Rather, they are inserted, often after suitable modification, within a “modern” (or perhaps “postmodern”) social order. Hegemony is therefore oxymoronic: it involves a splitting or doubling of opposition, which simultaneously wins and losses, gains entrance into the “halls of power” and is ‘co-opted’, “cross over” into mainstream culture and is deprived of its critical content”.<sup>12</sup>

Winant rightly articulates the challenges to marginalized groups when negotiating hegemonic power; and highlights the dynamic nature of hegemony. My work here will stress the ways in which subjugated groups assert agency in a struggle *for* hegemonic power rather than an exclusive emphasis on how those groups are over-determined by such power. As George Lipsitz (1988) argues, hegemony is a dynamic process of continued struggle between dominant and subordinate groups, rather than an imposed dominance over inert subjugated masses. Even when counter-hegemonic movements fail to win concrete material victories in the short term, they gain the long-term benefits of raising conscious among subjugated peoples and challenging societal norms. As an example, Lipsitz offers the modern American Civil Rights movement.

In terms of concrete concessions, they secured little more than the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Yet the ideological and political forces set in motion by that movement reverberated to every corner of the world in subsequent years and served as the impetus for oppositional action on innumerable fronts.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Winant, 29.

<sup>13</sup> George Lipsitz, “The Struggle for Hegemony,” *Journal of American History* 75 no. 1 (1988): 149.

It is this ideological terrain, rather than the material, that Antonio Gramsci offered as his “war of positions” that emphasizes the importance of subjugated groups challenging the dominant norms rather than just seizing State power. This ideological landscape will take center stage in the analyses I offer. This dynamic understanding of hegemony is especially important in regards to the medium I am addressing in this work, popular culture, of which Hip Hop is a part.

Highlighting the dynamic nature of hegemonic struggle, Elizabeth G. Traube (1996) argues that “popular culture, in this conception, was not reducible to a form of social control imposed from above, but neither could it be understood as purely expressive culture emergent from below”<sup>14</sup>. Echoing Winant above, Traube writes that the popular is maintained by the “dominant reaching into the cultural formations of subordinate groups, selectively appropriating elements, and stitching them into new discourses”<sup>15</sup>.

The coercive nature of hegemony is evident in the phenomena of black face minstrelsy that dominated American popular culture for over a century spanning the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Arguably, America’s first form of nation-wide popular culture, minstrelsy was the practice of white men blackening their faces to appear on stage as grotesque distortions of black bodies. This practice used racist depictions such as the docile and buffoonish Jim Crow and the bumbling pseudo-intellectual Zip Coon to register the dissatisfaction of working-class white males with Victorian bourgeoisie society. In early forms, black face minstrelsy was performed in mixed-race and poor environments registering class solidarity between poor whites and blacks even as it perpetuated awful stereotypes of black Americans. Eventually minstrelsy moved from the marginalized and racially mixed environments of working class theatres to the main stages of

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth G. Traube, “ ‘The Popular’ in American Culture,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25 (1996): 133.

<sup>15</sup> Traube 134.



New York City and others around the world. This practice became so pervasive that African American stage performers were soon forced to blacken themselves further to appeal to “authentic” coon performances white audiences expected. Black face minstrelsy became a tool of white elites to remind themselves of a better place and time when Mammy, Uncle Tom, Topsy, and other black stereotypes of the American South under slavery knew their place. In this way, although minstrelsy grew out of a mixed race practice, even its class-oriented multicultural beginnings were co-opted by bourgeoisie in the service of dominant norms<sup>16</sup>.

However, hegemony and its relation to popular culture are further complicated by the role of the audience. Rather than treat the audience as simple innate receivers of popular culture Robin D.G. Kelley (1992), building on work by Lawrence Levine (1977), suggests that:

Audiences do make critical choices about what to see and hear, reinterpret the indented meanings of various texts, and despite constraints, ultimately help shape the production of popular culture. In the process, depending on where one is situated, audiences also help construct and reproduce hegemony.<sup>17</sup>

Kelley’s approach emphasizes a conversational dynamic between dominant culture norms and audiences. People are not simply vessels into which dominant norms are poured but instead publics reinterpret, challenge, and of course reproduce hegemonic norms. In this way, Kelley dismisses the fixed understandings of the “popular” and the “folk”, and stresses the culturally constructed nature of terms that are meant to separate processes that actually happen in concert and as a response to one another. Kelley challenges the assumptions made by Levine (1977) and

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<sup>16</sup> Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); W.T. Lhamon Jr. , *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); and John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult and Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Folk’,” *American Historical Review* 97 no. 5 (1992): 1405.

others that “the degree of marginalization and the assumed distance from commercial influence is what determines ‘authenticity’ in folk culture”<sup>18</sup>. This assumption codifies folklore expression as a singular cultural entity as opposed to a dynamic process that can both subvert and reproduce hegemony<sup>19</sup>. Kelley’s formulation breaks down the barriers between what we deem “popular” and “folk” culture and asks scholars to understand the ways that audiences re-interpret popular culture forms with considerations towards race, class, sexual orientation, etc. This approach rejects cynical views of popular culture as over-determined by corporate mass culture manipulation or solely the result of populist cultural consensus or some innate cultural authenticity. In this way, Hegemony is a dynamic process of negotiation of power in which the status quo must continually assert itself against discontent publics. Publics responding to hegemony will create cultural expressions that challenge, affirm, and re-interpret dominant norms. When taking a critical look at badman and gangsta rap in the next chapter understanding these black masculine expressive forms in this dynamic context is critical.

### Black Men and Hegemonic Masculinity

Like race, gender, is a socially constructed category that has become associated with particular characteristics in American society. Men are physically strong, men are emotionally distant, men are sexually aggressive, men are rough, men are individualist, etc. These characteristics are not innate to men nor are they somehow attached to the biological facts of male bodies; they are the result of ideological formations meant to maintain hegemonic power. R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005) explain that hegemonic masculinity is not true in terms of real numbers of men that fit the ideal, but is rather normalized across the society,

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<sup>18</sup> Kelley, 1992, 1402.

<sup>19</sup> Kelley, 1992, 1405.

not primarily through violence, but through culture, institutions, and persuasion. It is an ideal by which all men are measured and also justifies the domination of women<sup>20</sup>. Hegemonic masculinities have little to do with the lived experience of actual men. Instead they are a set of ideals, desires, and fantasies that dictate the social behavior of men and their interactions with women.

In her work, Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism, Patricia Hill Collins explains the benchmarks of hegemonic masculinity in the United States. I will focus only on a few of the benchmarks important to the argument here. First, the hegemonic man is clearly defined in opposition to women. If women are emotional, irrational, and hysterical then the men are expected to be analytical, authoritative, and forceful. The oppositional nature of this definition on the surface, however, hides the actual dependent nature of this binary.

The irony is that whereas dependency is typically seen as a female attribute, femininity does not *depend* on males staying in their place. In contrast, men who accept this dimension of dominant gender ideology require control over women (which takes many forms) in order to know that they are “real” men.<sup>21</sup>

Collins’ assertion regarding the dependent nature of the first benchmark will be important when I return to how artists challenge hegemonic masculinity in the final chapter. For now, it is important to note here how the assertion of hegemonic manhood is defined against an opposing definition of womanhood. In this way, the “Other” is implicated in the dominant norm because it is defined against it. This first benchmark is asserted differently in black communities than in white communities. Mass media depictions of black men as pimps and gangstas are meant to

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<sup>20</sup> Connell, R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society* 19 no. 6 (2005): 832.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 189.

refute assumptions of “weak” black men and do so often through controlling women. As a result of this dynamic, Collins writes, an adversarial relationship is created between black men and women<sup>22</sup>.

Violence and authoritative power also play a crucial role in defining hegemonic masculinity. Collins writes that while white men who have generally had access to military, political, and economic power that has allowed them to assert this aspect of hegemonic masculinity, black men in the United States have generally been barred from asserting these aspects of masculine power. For this reason, black men have turned to their bodies and physicality as a place of masculine power<sup>23</sup>.

Hegemonic men are not homosexual. Although the national landscape on issues of marriage equality, gay and lesbian persons serving in the U.S. military, and even the national dialogue broadly about gay and lesbian bodies has shifted substantially, homophobia still plays a central role in defining who men are or are not. Under hegemonic masculinity gay men are associated with the effeminate and are seen as the ultimate weak men<sup>24</sup>. Collins writes that “In this construction of hegemonic masculinity, gay men mark the contradictions that plague male heterosexuality itself”. In other words the presence of gay bodies

Collins’ final assertion will be important to keep in mind going forward. Hegemonic masculinity also excludes black men because “real” men are not black<sup>25</sup>. Black men have long been excluded from hegemonic masculinity by assertion that they are closer to animals than humans, are associated with boyhood and not manhood, and are docile, unintelligent, and incapable of rational and sophisticated thought. Collins argues that this combination of gender

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<sup>22</sup> Collins, 189.

<sup>23</sup> Collins, 190.

<sup>24</sup> Collins, 192.

<sup>25</sup> Collins, 193.

and racial marginalization under hegemonic masculinity means that at times black men will aspire to masculinities that value “achieving great wealth, marrying the most desirable women (White), expressing aggression in socially sanctioned arenas (primarily as athletes, through the military, or law enforcement), and avoiding suggestions of homosexual bonding”<sup>26</sup>. Hegemonic masculinity as opposite that of black masculinity was supported through racial iconography. This particular iconography surrounding black bodies has a long history, and over time would support political, economic, and social policy that would further marginalized black men and women from American society.

### Racialized Iconography

In the 16th and 17th centuries European explorers lauded and admired the cities and governance they found in the African interior. However, by the 19th century this praise quickly disappeared as Africa became associated with the absence of the trappings of European “civilization.” European adventurers related the lush vegetation and myriad of animal species they encountered to a place that was uncultivated, untamed, and wild. These same characteristics are the elements African peoples came to be associated with as well.<sup>27</sup> In this way, within the white imagination, African peoples became only a step above the orangutans, the primitive ancestors of Europeans, and near the bottom of an evolutionary rung that included: civilization, barbarism, savagery, and finally primitivism.<sup>28</sup> Africans were coded as brutes, crude, incapable of higher thought, childlike, perverse, and particularly sexual. Pieterse (1992) relates an account of a European slaver who observed that intercourse between an African man and women was as

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<sup>26</sup> Collins, 193.

<sup>27</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of African and Black in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 53.

<sup>28</sup> Pieterse, 37.

“libidinous and shameless as monkeys, or baboons”.<sup>29</sup> This quote captures the deviant hypersexuality that becomes so important to shaping ideologies surrounding blackness, gender, and sexuality that will prevail for centuries thereafter. In this way, the black body comes to serve as an important site for both confirming and also resisting black subjugation. Collins (2005), writes of the sign of “blackness” that,

for Both women and men, Western social thought associated Blackness with an imagined uncivilized, wild sexuality and uses this association as one lynchpin of racial difference. Whether depicted as “freaks” of nature or as being the essence of nature itself, savage, untamed sexuality characterizes Western representations of women and men of African descent.<sup>30</sup>

Western representations of “blackness” were embodied in personas such as “Luke the Baboon boy” whose picture can be found on 1920’s South African postcards telling the story of an African who was raised by baboons before being rescued by Europeans and brought into civilization.<sup>31</sup> This particular iconography would serve as the mainstream text that would encompass large swaths of American popular culture and economy. The importance of this iconography in maintaining the racial status quo is evident in the far-reaching entertainment industry of 19<sup>th</sup> century blackface minstrelsy. Ubiquitous and long popular minstrel characters such as Mammy, Sambo, Buck, Jezebel, and Uncle Tom all dreamed up in order to naturalize “blackness” as grotesque, hypersexual, unsophisticated, and not worthy of praise, care, or humanity, and largely only in existence for the service of white Americans and white supremacy.

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<sup>29</sup> Pieterse, 41.

<sup>30</sup> Collins, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Pieterse, 42.

The buffoonish, doting, and unsophisticated “coon” played by white men wearing blackface “affirmed the notion that black men were unfit for the responsibilities of democracy”.<sup>32</sup>

From Aunt Jemima pancake mix, Uncle Ben rice, to soap, children’s cartoons, household items, radio and television programming to critically acclaimed and financially successful films such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939)—the iconography of “blackness” would simultaneously reinforce black Americans as irresponsible and unfit for civilization, while also rationalizing white supremacy and the conditions black Americans endured in an oppressive environment. This racialized logic led to the conclusion that black Americans were jobless, poor, and uneducated not because of crippling systemic and institutional racism that marginalized them at every turn; but because they could not compete with white intellect and western civilization. The laughing, smiling, doting, “coon”, a creation of their own psyche, assuaged white Americans of any guilt or responsibility for the condition of millions of black Americans.<sup>33</sup> The iconography of “blackness” allowed many white Americans to be blind to the realities of racism, and forced African Americans to contend with the specter of “blackness” in order to engage in the society.

The mainstream racialized text of “blackness” required African Americans to balance their personal truths with those fictions about them in the public square. How would black Americans assert their own humanity when the art and popular culture spheres offered them such little control over how they were depicted? W. E. B. DuBois 1927 symposium, “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” was an attempt to answer this questions. The subjective opinion on what made up the “best” portrayals of black Americans remained under dispute

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<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 13.

<sup>33</sup> Ogbar, 14.

throughout the symposium. However, there was some agreement that their should not be erasure of images of African Americans that were deemed unsophisticated or of the criminal element, but these images should not be the ones that dominate mainstream American culture.<sup>34</sup> Dubois and some of his contemporaries advocated for diverse representations of African Americans that included the full humanity of the black experience, criminal and outstanding citizens, one and all.<sup>35</sup> The balanced approach Dubois advocated for at the 1927 symposium has not always been the way black Americans have responded to racialized iconography.

### Black Manhood and Respectability

One way black Americans have responded to racialized depictions of “blackness” was by turning towards a narrative of respectability that was largely over-determined by white American interests. Anthony Foy (forthcoming) finds that by the end of the 19th century many of the black autobiographers sought to create a narrative of racial uplift that was preoccupied with constructing the image of a black middle class defined by notions of respectability: Victorian chaste sexual values, protestant work ethic, normative gender roles, Christian religiosity etc. These narratives sought to compete with stereotypes of black Americans as anti-social and deviant, while also saying to white consumers that at least this specific class of African Americans were prepared for citizenship. These post-Reconstruction narratives attempted to give dignity to black Americans, but only in the ways that made white consumers comfortable. African American autobiographers were preoccupied with a particular emblematic subjectivity still inscribed within the needs of white America. Foy notes that in a time when crime novels were extremely popular, African American autobiographers remained focused on a respectable

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<sup>34</sup> Ogbar, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Ogbar, 21.



racial uplift narrative that scrubbed away and suppressed anything unsavory in the eyes of white gaze and white consumer publics.

Respectability narratives also reinforced the limited representations of black male subjectivities that were viable in mainstream American culture. Mark Anthony Neal (2005) takes on the assumptions underlying the respectability narrative and its male protagonist the “Strong Black Man” who was “conceived as the ultimate counter to the distorted images of shiftless shuffling, threatening, and dangerous black men that populated virtually every facet of American public and commercial life”.<sup>36</sup> The “Strong Black Man” was embodied in late the 18th and early 19th centuries, at times, by men such as Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Dubois, Booker T. Washington, and Prince Hall Masons founder Martin Delaney; and much later in the 1960s by Black Nationalists and Afrocentric thinkers such Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, Louis Farrakhan, Maulana Karenga, Amiri Baraka and others; all who were incredible advocates of racial justice but also relied on a very narrow vision of manhood.<sup>37</sup> Although subscribers were fierce fighters in the battle for Civil Right and justice, the “Strong Black Man” model is also animated by a patriarchal regime, normative gender roles, misogyny, and homophobia. For Neal, the “Strong Black Man” image invented to challenge centuries of racial violence and oppression falls too short of the complete task in very specific ways:

The figure of the “Strong Black Man” can be faulted for championing a stunted, conservative, one-dimensional, and stridently heterosexual vision of black masculinity that has little to do with the vibrant, virile, visceral masculinities that are lived in the real world.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, *New Black Man* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 25.

<sup>37</sup> Neal, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Neal, 24.

The “Strong Black Man”, despite his positive qualities, codified patriarchy and a particular social class ideal that in totality advanced a narrow set of values that did not allow for the full expression of the black masculine self.

In another space there existed a much more secular discourse that occurred at the vernacular level within pool halls, street corners, bars, and other working-class African American environments. In this other space, black Americans sought to establish their own humanity in the face of racial ideology, but also rejected notions of black respectability. I do not intend to suggest that the world described by the cult of respectability was wholly separate from the more secular environments of working-class black Americans. Nor do I want to suggest that one path was “right.” Instead, I suggest that the representations of both the cult of respectability and the secular black world offered different opportunities and pitfalls in the battle against racial iconography.

Public discourse about racial iconography tends to dismiss secular or working-class depictions of blackness as crude and unsophisticated, while privileging the images of those in the “respectable” or middle-class as worthy of adulation. Rarely, are middle-class values criticized for advancing narrow social norms that further entrench patriarchy, misogyny, and homophobia because they map so cleanly on to what has become understood as normative. Part of the work here is to illuminate how secular and working-class cultural expressions have much to offer in the way of discourses on racial iconography and ideology. These cultural expressions should not be dismissed because the packaging of the message is found to be “unbecoming” or because they make viewers/listeners, black and white, uncomfortable. The next chapter will explore such black masculine cultural expression in light of the theoretical considerations above: black “badman” ballads and toasts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and gangsta rap of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## CHAPTER TWO: The Black Badman and Gangsta Rap

Lawrence Levine (1977) argues that a crucial development of African American folk characters in the post-emancipation period was that they directly confronted dominant systems. The wit and guile of the Signifying Monkey and other African animal tricksters would not disappear, but would morph into more direct forms of resistance and defiance. Enter the black badman, an outlaw hero figure whose stories of sexual prowess, violent confrontation, virile masculine triumph, and humor signal black masculine dissatisfaction with their marginalized position in American society, while also reveling in hypermasculinity. Black badman figures would share some aspects with their European counterparts such as Robin Hood. Both forms include folk characters who are isolated, exhibit asocial behaviors, and transgress against prevailing social norms.<sup>39</sup> Levine observes that while European folk characters such as Robin Hood are presented as noble outlaws whose transgressive behavior is romanticized, black folk outlaw heroes in the badman tradition are not. They prey on the weak as equally as they do the strong. The black badman is associated nearly exclusively with danger and anti-social behavior: “Their badness was described without the excuse of socially redeeming qualities”.<sup>40</sup> For black Americans facing brutality, economic and social oppression in the post-bellum period, active resistance was essential to survival. Eithne Quinn aptly points out that, “the fact that poor blacks were hostile and resistant to brutally repressive state apparatuses, and that their folklore would express this hostility, was simply given”.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 417.

<sup>40</sup> Levine, 417.

<sup>41</sup> Quinn, 2005, 103-104.

Although Levine rejects the badman as representative of pathological culture, he concludes that the badman was the result of rage, fury, nihilism, that sought to tear down the existing social order. For these reasons Levine sees very little redeeming qualities in the badman:

Black singers, storytellers, and audiences might temporarily and vicariously live through the exploits of their bandit heroes, but they were not beguiled into looking to these asocial self-centered, and futile figures for any permanent remedies.<sup>42</sup>

John Roberts (1989) pushes back against Levin's characterization of the badman precisely because it looks at African American expressive cultural practices measured by the stick of European cultural practices; and does not take into account the special condition that black American's faced under an oppressive American state. Roberts rejects the view that the badman only offered an expressive outlet for black rage and discontent, but goes a step further and argues that the badman provides "a model of emulative behavior adaptable to real-life situations".<sup>43</sup> This chapter takes Roberts approach to explore, first, the black badman and then engages Eithne Quinn's (2005) work on Hip Hop's gangsta rap. Rather than approach these black expressive forms as a sign of black pathology or some subjectivity created in a social vacuum, the goal here is to describe the hypermasculinity that guides these expressive forms as a response to socioeconomic marginalization and the brutal conditions black folk, and men specifically, endured within particular historical moments.

### The Black Badman

The black badman and his stories and ballads resonated in a particular moment in time for black men as a subversive persona against racial subjugation. Roberts finds that the socio-cultural and political environment is crucial to the rise of particular folk characters. Important to

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<sup>42</sup> Levine, 419-420.

<sup>43</sup> Roberts, 174.

his assertion is that black folk characters play an affective role in describing emulative behaviors for individuals in any particular period.<sup>44</sup> Roberts approach to the badman highlights the figures usefulness to marginalized, working-class, black American communities in the decades following slavery. In this way, his approach differs from those of other scholars such as Roger D. Abrahams (1970), who focus nearly entirely on the ways they perceive the folk character as unproductive. Abrahams argues that the black badman is a reactionary response and only offers an expressive outlet for hostility towards an oppressive society.<sup>45</sup> Roberts approach attempts to return agency to the cultural practitioners. The black badman stands at the crux of the secular or working-class response to racist iconography and ideology. In the long tradition of African expressive folk characters, the badman functions as a symbol of transgression and subversion against the racial hegemonic order. The black badman rises to prominence during the post-emancipation era as an outlaw hero figure and follows the animal-trickster, prominent during slavery, in this ongoing tradition. Eithne Quinn (2005) finds that badman tales were told mainly through toasts and ballads in post-bellum Southern black working-class environments. Toasting occurred among black men and was the practice of reciting partially improvised stories or oral poems of physical and sexual triumph. One of the most popular badman figures, Stackolee (also Stagger Lee or Stagolee), was featured in stories that routinely found him turning on hard times and traveling to a bar, the Bucket of Blood, where he kills the bartender, has sex with a prostitute, and eventually murders arch-nemesis Billy Lyons.<sup>46</sup> A common Stackolee verse would proceed:

Now, some dirty bitch turned out the light,

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<sup>44</sup> Roberts, 174.

<sup>45</sup> Abrahams, 66 and Roberts, 174.

<sup>46</sup> Quinn, 2005, 94-95.

But I had Billy Lyons in my god-damned sight.  
One little bitch hollered, "Stackolee, please!"  
I shot that bitch clean to her knees.  
The other one hollered, "Call the law!"  
I shot that bitch in god-damned jaw.<sup>47</sup>

In the verse above, Stackolee faces down his penultimate foe, Billy Lyons, and also wantonly shoots two women who plead for and try to protect Billy Lyons' life. Like many Stackolee and other badman verses, the above actions occur in a saloon. Other badman settings include pool halls and juke joints in black communities. In badman ballads these locals are generally violent places where illegal activity of all sorts was taking place. In reality, for black Americans, these settings served as a respite from a white supremacist society, an escape from the intrusive racism that affected their material lives; these were spaces where they could celebrate their humanity.<sup>48</sup> In portions of these neighborhoods, colloquially referred to as "bottoms", law enforcement was lax and allowed illegal activity such as gambling, bootlegging, drug trafficking, numbers and other such activity to flourish. The loose social restraint in these areas meant that activities considered illegal in the larger society were considered as forms of recreation in the "bottom".<sup>49</sup>

The threat of white intrusion in the black communities in general and in the "bottoms" usually came in the form of the law or police. Lacking the nearly absolute control over the lives of black Americans that slavery had afforded, white supremacists turned to the law to re-codify black Americans as second-class citizens. In post-slavery societies black Americans increasingly found themselves subject to State police authority and laws that actively marginalized them, while also exhibiting negligence towards their communities. Black communities became places

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<sup>47</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, "'Gettin' Grown': Notes on Gangsta Rap Music and Notions of Manhood," *Journal of African American Studies* 4 no.1 (1996): 32.

<sup>48</sup> Roberts, 203.

<sup>49</sup> Roberts, 204-205.

where police patrolled only at the benefit of white Americans and had little care for black life and well-being. In this environment the law was not seen as a helpful tool in black communities but rather an extension of white supremacy into segregated safe-havens.<sup>50</sup> Under these conditions “African Americans have had few reasons to view the law as anything other than antagonistic to their interest”.<sup>51</sup> The law was also used to marginalize black folk trying to eke out a living in post-emancipation American. Sharecropping, which burdened black families with enormous debt,<sup>52</sup> and discriminatory hiring practices in the North and South would bar black folk from finding well-paying industrial jobs. These practices were supported by a new system of racialized laws.<sup>53</sup> The black badman folk hero, then, became a representation of the rough-and-tumble lifestyle that could be found in the black “bottom”, but also a defiant stance against a system of oppressive laws and surveillance in post-emancipation black communities. However, the badman also represented a political agenda: certainly a rejection of white racism, but also a rejection of black middle class values.

In this vein, Stackolee’s frequent enemy, Billy Lyons, served as the representation of the cult of respectability while Stackolee stood for the “bottoms” and the black working-class secular environment. The class overtones of Stackolee’s ballads and toasts possibly came from the real-life people from which the stories are derived. Citing research conducted by Cecil Brown, Quinn claims that the actual Stackolee, Lee Shelton, was a labor activist from the American south who clashed with Billy Lyons who was of the respectable freed class. The antagonism between the two comes when Shelton tries to unionize the black proletariat against the wishes of the “conservative individualist” Lyons. In this way, Billy Lyons represented the

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<sup>50</sup> Roberts, 204.

<sup>51</sup> Roberts, 182.

<sup>52</sup> Roberts, 190.

<sup>53</sup> Roberts, 191.

“social boundaries, fears, and agendas of a new and fragile black elite...a deadly tale about black social identity and status”.<sup>54</sup> In this way, Stackolee’s violent, sexual, and unruly behavior “willfully rebutted ideas of black gentility and assimilationist aspiration”.<sup>55</sup>

The dynamic I hope to illuminate here is the ways in which the racialized images of blackness (or to use Patricia Hill Collins (2005) term “controlling images” of “blackness”) that make up the dominant text were navigated by working class black folk. In this way, black folk were not vessels unto which dominant images and text were poured but created their own symbols, meanings, and representations. The representations that black folk created were often formed in negotiation with the dominant texts. Important to this point is Robin D. G. Kelley’s (1992) assertion that popular culture can subvert as well as reproduce hegemony. Kelley writes that,

such an interpretation obscures the degree to which “folk” culture—especially during the past century—is a bricolage, a cutting, a pasting, and a incorporating of various cultural forms that then become categorized in racially or ethnically coded aesthetic hierarchy.<sup>56</sup>

If the “folk” is simply based on distance from the commercial marketplace, in this context, blackface minstrelsy and the commercial apparatus that supported it can be read as having anti-folk sensibilities, while the isolated black working-class communities who sung the ballads of the badman were “pure” black folk expression. These distinctions are arbitrary at best and obscure the ways black cultural practitioners are negotiating hegemony. Instead of envisioning cultural practice as static, essentialized elements they are rather a dynamic, malleable, and interdependent set of practices that are capable of both affirming and challenging hegemony. It is for these reasons that Herman Gray (1995) observes that “contemporary expressions of black

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<sup>54</sup> Quinn, 2005, 112.

<sup>55</sup> Quinn, 2005, 113.

<sup>56</sup> Kelley, 1992, 1405.



masculinity work symbolically in a number of directions at once; they challenge and disturb racial and class constructions of blackness; they also rewrite and reinscribe the patriarchal heterosexual basis of masculine privilege (and domination) based on gender and sexuality”.<sup>57</sup>

The hypermasculine bent of the black badman illustrates this dynamic precisely. As the discussion above outlined, the badman was invested in challenging the racialized sign of “blackness” propagated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the badman is heavily reliant on a hypermasculinity meant to counter the docile, boyish, unintelligent black man of the white racist imagination.<sup>58</sup> In America’s patriarchal society where manhood is defined by status and wealth, and the power one earns by amassing as much of each as possible, black men were disenfranchised, pushed into joblessness, referred to as “boys” in public, feminized by the white male gaze, and generally marginalized so that they could not perform masculinity as the large society had constructed it.<sup>59</sup> Against this sense of powerlessness black men created a hypermale. The hypermasculinity of the badman toasts are apparent in the way they “celebrate the sexual prowess of the male storyteller while simultaneously reducing women to mere props to men’s sexual and material exploits”.<sup>60</sup> Quintessential badman Stackolee is nearly always depicted in aggressive sexual activity in his songs.

So I walked around the room and I seen this trick,  
and we went upstairs and we started real soon.  
Now me and this broad we started to tussle  
and I drove twelve inches a dick through her ass before she could move a muscle.  
We went downstairs where we were before,

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<sup>57</sup> Herman Gray, “Black Masculinity and Visual Culture,” *Callaloo* 18 no. 2 (1995): 402.

<sup>58</sup> It should be noted that brutish and bestial iconographies of black bodies existed during this period as well.

<sup>59</sup> Ogbar, 76 and Perry, 121.

<sup>60</sup> Ogbar, 76.

we fucked on the table and all over the floor.<sup>61</sup>

The hypersexual nature of the badman was a response to the real lack of power black men felt elsewhere in a society in which they were marginalized and derided. In segregated black communities black men could claim masculine power through sex, but in ways that re-asserted patriarchy. bell hooks (2004) writes,

In a segregated African-American life, patriarchal sex was not only the medium for assertion of manhood; it was also reconceptualized in the space of blackness as entitled pleasure for black males who were not getting all the perks of patriarchal maleness in arenas where white men were still controlling the show.<sup>62</sup>

As alluded to above, Stackolee's hypermasculine nature is also present in the violence he inflicts on others: women are frequently killed in his ballads, the bartender of the "Bucket of Blood" is usually slain, and of course there is Billy Lyons who frequently receives "rockets in his motherfuckin' chest".<sup>63</sup> In some ballads Stackolee is killed by the police: "cops started fallin in/ One jumped up and blew gas/ I jumped up for the deck and caught a rocket in my mother fuckin neck".<sup>64</sup> However, far more frequently it is the case that Stackolee is defiant in the face of the law. In some ballads he is brought before a judge in order to receive sentencing for his crimes. Stackolee's usual reply is to scoff at the sentencing as not really hard time: "Said, 'Gee, judge, that's no time, I got a brother on Levenworth jackin' ninety-nine".<sup>65</sup> In this way, the badman can be read to re-create dominant assumptions about black criminality, sexual potency,

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<sup>61</sup> Bruce Jackson, *"Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me": Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 47.

<sup>62</sup> bell hooks. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 71.

<sup>63</sup> Jackson, 47.

<sup>64</sup> Jackson, 53.

<sup>65</sup> Jackson, 52.

and violence, all notions that play right into white racial fantasies and the racialized sign of “blackness.” However, to read the badman in this limited way removes agency from black cultural practitioners and allows them to be over-determined by white supremacy rather than seeing the dynamic process that is at work. Imani Perry (2004) argues that the hyperviolence and misogyny to be found in the badman toast, and in subsequent forms such as the badmen of gangsta rap, should not be read as evidence of the brutishness or pathological nature of black men, but as a response to the long lasting racial, class, and gender oppression that have limited their lives.<sup>66</sup> Perry’s point, and mine as well, is not to wholly dismiss the hyperviolent and misogynistic nature of the badman ballads, but to understand them as a response to the horrific condition under which black Americans lived. That it is so hard to decouple these particularly sexualized and violent stories from the racialized sign of “blackness” that reinforce ideas about pathologies among black Americans, speaks to the ways in which stereotypes of “blackness” have naturalized in the American psyche. Keeping this in mind, Perry instructs that, “our witness of black violence and misogyny should provoke analysis and alarm more than offense”.<sup>67</sup>

The debate on how blackness should be represented in the public square that Dubois facilitated in 1927 continues today in black popular forms such as Hip Hop, and its most derided subgenre, gangsta rap. However, a close reading of gangsta rap reveals the comparable complexities that emerge from the badman around hypermasculinity and anti-racism. The parallels between the badman and the gangsta rapper are in part due to the similar circumstances from which both cultural icons arise. Clearly there are differences in the African American life from the post-emancipation period to the 21st century, so I do not mean to suggest that the badman and gangsta rapper are mirror images. However, they are of the same tradition and the

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<sup>66</sup> Perry, 125.

<sup>67</sup> Perry, 125.

resilience and longevity of this particularly hypermasculine character suggests its importance within black vernacular culture's resistive practices and the continuation of the oppressive conditions that evoke such responses. Figures like Stackolee and the gangsta rappers of Hip Hop do not share exactly the same historical realities, but I want to read them side by side precisely because it re-enforces the conditional nature and hypermasculinity that animates both cultural expressions.

### Gangsta Rap

The above reading of badman ballads and toasts should give a sense of the socio-historical realities within which black male expressive practices have developed. The hypermasculinity present in the gangster rap iterations of these folk narratives is also a response to socio-economic, racial and gender discrimination. It is not my intention here to dismiss the hyper-violent and sexist lyricism within gangsta rap, but instead to put the genre in proper context. In this sense, gangsta rappers were keenly aware of the tropes they pushed into an American mainstream popular culture already ripe for images of African Americans males as lurid, dangerous, criminal, and hypersexual. Gangsta rappers took part in the interdependent nature of race in that they performed a particular blackness and were implicated in that performance. Quinn suggests that gangsta rappers were motivated by multiple reasons among them,

To induce black masculine resistance, pride, and pleasure; to goad and provoke black and white bourgeoisie society with its badass-nigga performance; to adopt a mask in the face

of intractable mainstream demonization; and to be sure, to sell racially encoded rebellion to an eager youth market.<sup>68</sup>

A close reading of gangsta rap reveals the same complexities that emerge from the badman around hypermasculinity and anti-racism. The parallels between the badman and the gangsta rapper are in part due to the similar circumstances from which both cultural icons arise. Just as the badman spoke for working-class marginalized, jobless, over-policed, disenfranchised black folk of the late 19th and into the early 20th century, gangsta rap would emerge from similar constraints and attempt to do the same. Gangsta rap's earliest flagship cities were the largely black and Latino City of Compton, a suburb of Los Angeles, California, and Watts a neighborhood in L.A. The 1980's saw deindustrialization of these neighborhoods that led to high unemployment as factory jobs left the inner city and technology jobs moved to places like Silicon Valley. State government neglected inner-city youth programing, parks and recreation, and social programs for development in the growing suburbs.<sup>69</sup> Original gangsta rapper Ice Cube's father, Hosea Jackson, had an employment history that exemplified the lack of job security in South Central. At one point a machinists at a brass works, Jackson was forced to move into the low-paying and low-skill service industry after the factory closed. He became a grounds keeper at the UCLA campus.<sup>70</sup> With unemployment growing youth turned to the illegal economy fueled by the emerging crack cocaine industry that would bring increasing violence to these neighborhoods. In response law enforcement agents focused not on curbing crime and

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<sup>68</sup> Quinn, 2005, 106.

<sup>69</sup> Kelley, 1996, 192.

<sup>70</sup> Quinn, 2005, 43.

violence in Watts and Compton, but on managing it. Prisons no longer were places of discipline, but were used to house black bodies seen as menaces to society.<sup>71</sup>

In this environment black bodies were criminalized and seen as dangerous. The long-standing sign of “blackness” over-determined the response of the State and mass media to what was happening in these neighborhoods. Instead of viewing the deindustrialization of the inner-city and the joblessness as creating an external social crisis, African American men and women themselves were blamed for the economic conditions of these neighborhoods. Joblessness, lack of education, and economic opportunities were not due to the rapidly changing social and economic realities of the inner-city, but were the result of the lazy “welfare queen” who sucked off the teat of government rather than find a job. These narratives also shaped the political conversation of the 1980s and were used with great affect by Republican politicians. Words like “underclass” became synonymous with poor blacks and their neighborhoods became “dependent” and “dangerous”. This rhetoric had the affect of consolidating the white right-wing voting block against the inner city as the existential threat to American values and social norms.<sup>72</sup> These racially driven dog-whistle narratives were successful during the 1980s and remain so today because they map so cleanly on to assumptions about “blackness” established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Gangsta rap, however, emerged as the voice of the inner-city and described the conditions under which black men endured and the choices they had to make under those conditions. Writing specifically about early gangsta rappers who pulled their inspiration from Compton and Watts, Kelley explains that, “In gangsta rap there is almost always a relationship between the conditions in which these characters live and the decisions they make...young urban

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<sup>71</sup> Kelley, 1996, 185.

<sup>72</sup> Quinn, 2005, 66.

black men make their own history but not under circumstances of their own choosing”.<sup>73</sup> In spite of its hypermasculinity, misogyny, and its own perpetuation of stereotype of black youth criminality, early gangsta rap was crucial in conveying to a mass audience the conditions that black folk have had to endure and especially the harassment young African Americans received at the hands of urban police forces. Gangsta rapper Ice Cube was keen on commenting on the social and institutional structures that he saw were limiting options for young black people in Los Angeles. For instance, Ice Cube’s “A Bird in the Hand” tells the story of a black man just out of high school who can’t find a decent job. Eventually he turns to the drug trade when he realizes the drug dealers are the only ones making any money in the neighborhood. Now a successful drug dealer the protagonist faces scrutiny from the police: “now you put the feds against me/ Cause I couldn’t follow the plan of the presidency/ I’m never gettin’ love again/ But blacks are too fuckin’ broke to be Republican”.<sup>74</sup> “A Bird in the Hand” makes the connection between the social condition of Los Angeles for African Americans and the limited choices they are left with in the rapidly deindustrialized inner city. Furthermore, Cube connects his dissatisfaction with the social conditions of his city with Republican rhetoric of the time surrounding the deviance of black youth. Earlier gangsta rappers such as Ice Cube and many others countered hegemonic narratives about “welfare queens”, deviant and dangerous black youth, and the “underclass” by focusing on how social institutions, State and federal government failed black America. The counter-narratives of gangsta rap worked to undermine the prevailing assumptions fueled by the sign of “blackness”. Although the badman toast and ballads implied this critique, gangsta rap fully realized a much more direct challenge to institutionalized racism.

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<sup>73</sup> Kelley, 1996, 194.

<sup>74</sup> Kelley, 1996, 195.

The “bottoms” were the social locale of the badman, “the streets” would play the same role for the gangsta rapper. Marginalized in places like Compton and South Central, Los Angeles black men turned to “the streets” as a socializing space where they affirmed a hypermasculinity found in gangsta rap and situated around the illegal economy. William Oliver (2006) posits that this alternative site of “the streets” is a network of spaces such as block corners, bars, pool rooms, convenient stores, barbershops etc. “The streets” serve as an alternative site for black male institutional socialization whose main purpose is to provide for the psychological needs of economically and socially marginalized black men. Oliver writes of “the streets”:

The cumulative effects of intergenerational exposure to historical and contemporary patterns of racial and gender oppression directed against Black males has served as a catalyst leading many marginalized Black males to socially construct masculine identities that place emphasis on toughness, sexual conquest, and street hustling.<sup>75</sup>

Oliver argues that the racial marginalization of black men in a later period has led to the construction of an aggressive masculinity that emphasizes toughness, sexual dominance, and an illegal economy.

Miles White (2011) explains that in the Hip Hop era the “streets” or the black ghetto not only represent a physical place, but a nomenclature that signals a particular black authenticity.<sup>76</sup> White identifies a number of performative gestures important to signaling masculine authenticity within this space, but that also lend themselves to transgressive readings against white supremacy. Channeling Foucault, White argues that *mean mugging*, a hardened facial expression found throughout gangsta rap music, throws back the “Panopticonic gaze of patriarchal structures of power in which black males are made hypervisible and the subject of constant

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<sup>75</sup> Oliver, William. Oliver, “ ‘The Streets’: An Alternative Black Male Socialization Institution,” *Journal of Black Studies* 36 no. 6 (2006): 921.

<sup>76</sup> Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 39.



surveillance by institutions of state power and media”.<sup>77</sup> Annette J. Saddick (2003) also recognized the power of the black male body as a space of transgressive performance when she writes that the “half naked, screaming, and sweating muscular body of the gangsta rapper”<sup>78</sup> challenges white authority that tries to keep the “savage” in his place. These affective gestures have the result of challenging white racist iconography of the smiling, submissive, doting “coon” and the oppressive regimes that seek to control black bodies, but also represent deeply hypermasculine stances.

Quinn (2005) argues that censorship would eventually remove some of the anti-authority aspects found in gangsta raps early flag bearers. Anti-police brutality songs such as the N.W.A. anthem “Fuck Tha Police” and Ice-T’s “Cop Killer” drew the ire of government and police authorities, as well as conservative backlash and record labels responded by censoring artists who included the controversial material on their records. These efforts intensified in the wake of the 1992 L.A. Riots, which some of these songs and/or artists seemed to have telegraphed for the American public.<sup>79</sup> With antiauthority lyrics marginalized at major record labels, the badmen of gangsta rap could no longer prey on the strong *and* the weak, but now only the weak. Quinn writes, “once the state stripped away half this equation, there remained only the stories about badmen preying on women and the weak—a wholesale supplanting of badman with bad nigga”.<sup>80</sup>

Hypermasculinity manifests itself in gangsta rap in misogynistic lyrics and rampant homophobia. Although gay and lesbian rappers have always been engaged in Hip Hop practices

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<sup>77</sup> White, 43.

<sup>78</sup> Annette J. Saddik, “Rap’s Unruly Body: The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage,” *TDR* 47 no. 4 (2003): 121.

<sup>79</sup> Quinn, 2005, 110.

<sup>80</sup> Quinn, 2005, 110.

their voices are largely pushed towards the margins and treated with hostility. Through interviews with gay male rappers D. Mark Wilson (2007) documents how the black gay male rappers felt ostracized from both white LGBTQ activist and heteronormative Hip Hop communities. Speaking to mainstream black male heterosexual rappers, filmmaker Byron Hurt (*Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, 2006) finds hostility towards gay and lesbian communities and absolute silence around LGBTQ issues. When Hurt asks popular New York City rapper Busta Rhymes about the possibility of gay and lesbian rappers in Hip Hop he refuses even to discuss the issue. Hurt also finds that aspiring artists feel they must fit into the narrow gun-slinging, masculine bravado driven subjectivities of some of the most popular Hip Hop artists in order to get the attention of record labels. The anxiety around homosexuality extends to the language of the genre. Michael Jeffries (2009) illuminates anxieties within Hip Hop masculinities exemplified by the use of the qualifier “no homo” (read: not homosexual). “No homo” has become a colloquial term used by men to distance themselves from any hint of homosexuality, imagined or real, when they have said something that might be perceived as showing admiration for other men.<sup>81</sup> For gangsta rappers and even rappers outside the genre distancing oneself from homosexuality and advancing a rabid homophobic position has become quintessential to asserting hypermasculine bona fides within the art forms mainstream.

Hypermasculinity is also apparent in how women are valued in mainstream Hip Hop depictions. In many rap music videos women are treated as sexual props to their male counterparts gyrating their scantily clad backsides, breast, and hips into the camera lens, their bodies bifurcated for and by the male gaze. The practice of calling these women “video vixens”,

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<sup>81</sup> Michael P. Jeffries, “Can a Thug (get some) Love?: Sex, Romance, and the Definition of a Hip Hop ‘Thug’.” *Women and Language* 32 no. 2 (2009): 38.

“video ho’s”, and more generally the use of derogatory words such “bitch” and “ho” as synonymous with women within rap lyrics reduces female presence to their ability to please men sexually. In this way, the male rapper only interact with women as sexual beings, silencing other aspect of their identity and only focusing on those elements that lend power to patriarchy.<sup>82</sup> Female emcees have also been reduced as the distance between the video vixen and the female emcee collapsed in the new millennium.

After the turn of the twentieth century, however, it became clear that sexuality, sexual objectification, and beautification constituted fundamental parts of the marketing of the female MC, thus collapsing distinctions between the video “hoe” and the female artist.<sup>83</sup>

For many critics of Hip Hop it is easy to read gangsta rap as succumbing to the commercial space of the music industry and losing some of the substantive content, complexity, and critical consciousness that guided earlier artist such as Ice cube, Ice-T, Geto Boys, and others. As gangsta rap took up more and more of the oxygen within Hip Hop, diverse narratives were pushed into the margins of the music industry apparatus. Dope-slanging, violent, and hypersexualized narratives took precedent as the new millennium approached. So called “conscious” rap by artists such as Common, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, De La Soul, and A Tribe Called Quest, while still prominent and respected, were continually branded outside the mainstream while more gangsta-oriented acts such as 50 Cent, Lloyd Banks, and Fat Joe claimed the center of the Hip Hop world by the early 2000s. Tricia Rose (2008) particularly laments the over-commercialization of gangsta, which incentivized limited depictions of black men and women within Hip Hop to the “gangsta-pimp-ho” trinity and seemed to concede the counter-narratives of the genre to hegemonic pressures.

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<sup>82</sup> Rose, 2008, 172.

<sup>83</sup> Perry, 156.

The social, artistic, and political figures like the gangsta and street hustle substantially devolved into apolitical, simple-minded, almost comic stereotypes. Indeed, by the late 1990s, most of the affirming, creative stories and characters that had stood at the defining core of hip hop has been gutted.<sup>84</sup>

There is a common displeasure expressed by critics, scholars, and fans alike about the trajectory of Hip Hop at the early points in the new millennium. Much of the discomfort with Hip Hop at its most commercial comes from the hypermasculine drive that narrows depictions of black men into street-hustling-pimps and black women into purely sexual beings. However, what I hope the conversation above has illuminated is that the hypermasculine narratives present within gangsta rap and its predecessor the narratives and toasts of the badman are a direct response to the social and economic conditions black Americans have confronted over the centuries. Again, I don't intend this reading to let artists off the hook in regards to interrogating narrow and hegemonic masculinities. Rather the goal here is to re-orient a conversation that largely gets explained by evoking the racialized sign of "blackness" rather than looking at the structural and social conditions that facilitate hypermasculinity with African American expressive cultural practices.

The above conversation illuminated the possible origins of hypermasculinity in black expressive culture as a response to the marginalization of black men from mainstream society that reasserted black male pride, control, and power. Rather than framing hypermasculinity as a pathology among black male performers or as a cultural formulation over-determined by white supremacy; it is possible to understand it as a part of a cultural expression responding to very specific socio-cultural environments at particular historical moments. The next part of this discussion will explain the shifting terrain of Hip Hop at this current moment, which lends itself to the possibility of new emergent masculinities entering the mainstream. Broadly, I argue that

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<sup>84</sup> Rose, 2008, 2.

this is happening because current Hip Hop artist are challenging preconceived hegemonic notions of gender, sexuality, and “blackness” by entering a liminal space that collapses hegemonic binaries.

The questions I want to be concerned with here is how are particular images of African Americans within the popular sphere useful to those people who create them at any specific time. Hypermasculinity served a particular purpose at a particular time, and although we will not long be done with the badman archetype as long as the racially antagonistic relationship between State authority and African Americans remains stagnant; I hope to show, in the next chapter, how Hip Hop’s most recent artists are engaging with masculinity in different ways that signal shifts away from the centrality of hypermasculinity as well as the opening up of new black masculine possibilities.

### CHAPTER THREE: Emerging Black Masculinities in Hip Hop

As scholars of cultural expression it is often tempting to decide what particular practices at any given moment are useful to marginalized groups in order to make their case for justice. In the final chapter of his book *Born in a Mighty Bad Land*, Jerry Bryant (2003) laments the rise of gangsta rap, especially its continuing commercialization. He is saddened over what he views as the loss of redemptive badman characters such as Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas. Of Bigger, Bryant writes:

Bigger accepts that the society whose mores he has violated has the right to punish him for what it deems a crime. But he refuses to internalize the morality of that society and so damns himself irretrievably in its eyes. It is that damnation that delivers him into transcendence...Bigger's bedrock integrity lies in his refusing to be co-opted by a society that has never played him fair

For Bryant the rise of gangsta rap signals the end of black folklore precisely because he sees its increased commercialization as a capitulation to mainstream culture. Bryant at once acknowledges the potential in the gangsta rappers ability to access the mainstream, but fears what is lost when this occurs.

As a realist I welcome the potential that lies in the rappers' readiness to blend, when possible, into the broader mainstream. But as a romantic I claim the right to continue to pay homage to a spirit who remained irrepressible even when doomed by his own actions.<sup>85</sup>

Bryant's take on gangsta rap is a familiar refrain, and there is no doubt that the rise of commercialized gangsta rap has obstructed the political potential of its very early practitioners.

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<sup>85</sup> Jerry H. Bryant, *Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent man in African American Folklore and Fiction*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 165.

However, Bryant and other scholars go too far when they reject gangsta rap or any popular form as lacking redeeming qualities or being over-determined by hegemonic norms. Cultural practitioners choose, for many reasons, symbols and representations that have meaning to them at any particular socio-historical moment and locality; and will create art that simultaneously affirm and challenge hegemony.

Bryant's argument also falls into the trap of separating the "folk" from the "commercial". As was noted earlier, these distinctions ring hollow because they assume some innate political value of the "folk" while denying the same in the "commercial". This distinction does not honor the dynamic hegemonic process at work and sells cultural practitioners short by not allowing them to have agency in both arenas. Dominant norms are present in both traditionally understood "folk" spaces and commercialized spaces; one can be assured then that counter-hegemonic and resistive forms are present as well.

Among the current era of male voices within rap music new masculine possibilities are emerging. These emerging masculinities are not purely progressive. In other words they do not in full seek to deconstruct gender norms, reject misogyny, masculine violence, or homophobia. However, black male rappers are choosing different ways to navigate the complicated nature of black masculinity, given the power of the masculine subject and the lack of value placed on the black body in American society. For the most part they are bringing to the forefront some of the contradictions within the black masculine subject that the hypermasculinity is supposed to cloud from view. In other words, artists practicing in emerging black masculinities are more likely to engage with the liminal areas of their masculine subjectivities. In concluding her book Quinn suggest the possibility of such a shift away from commercialized gangsterism, writing that, "Gangsta rap gave expressive shape to a period in which political protest declined sharply. But

now that the pendulum as swung so far across, it is time for counter-energies to begin amassing”.<sup>86</sup> It is my intention here to articulate some of the counter-energies that may be amassing especially as it relates to how black men are constructing black masculine subjectivity. However, before a specific conversation about how current artists are deconstructing hegemonic binaries in these ways, first I must address the crossing of binaries as an important act that these artists are engaging in broadly.

### Collapsing Hegemonic Binaries

In the Hip Hop context, hegemonic masculinity has become highly policed and has grown to be the dominant masculine ideal among mainstream Hip Hop personas. By adhering to the stringent masculine scripts hegemonic masculinity operates under, black male rappers stand to benefit from the male privilege afforded to those that are closer to the standard (Ogbar 2007). A clear lynchpin of the survival of gender and sexual hegemony is that it presupposes and makes natural binary and oppositional relationships between subjects. The “Self” and the “Other” are perceived to be separate entities, however, a deep paradox remains at the heart of hegemonic structures. The “Self” is shaped because of the creation of the “Other”. The relationship between the two are not on a spectrum, but rather interdependent, each part relying on the other for its meaning. In this way, the “Other” is always implicated in the “Self”.<sup>87</sup>

Western Thought has generally separated rational from the irrational, the mind and the body, good and evil, men and woman, etc. these binaries are staples in what we regard as modernity. Post-colonial scholars have long challenged modernity as a product sole of the

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<sup>86</sup> Quinn, 2005, 192.

<sup>87</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).



Western-European world. Not only is modernity dependent on the contributions, physical and epistemological, of the people of the Americas and of Africa and elsewhere, modernity is a constantly contested notion. Post-colonial scholars have long understood the dynamic relationship between the “Self” and “Other”. Modernity, both in a material sense and in a cultural sense, is not possible without the careful and deliberate underdevelopment of African peoples, the exploitation of their bodies for labor, the expatriation of the continents resources, and the cultural contributions of African peoples. The success, excesses, technological advancement, cultural production of Western Europe and the United States during the colonial period and beyond does not occur absent African peoples, or despite the perceived “backwardness” of African peoples, it is possible because of them.<sup>88</sup> This realization should cause a shift in perspective: marginalized peoples are not missing from the dominant narratives of modernity and subsequently globalization; we have only failed to understand in what ways the “Other” is also implicated.

African Diasporic practices have not traditionally taken the dichotomous cultural position modernity adheres too. Henry Louis Gates’ (1988) research on the African and African American practice of Signifying speaks to the different cultural practices that challenge Western-European notions of modernity. Certainly the multiplicity and plurality of the African trickster figures such as Esu and Ifa and their survival in the Western world in the Signifying Monkey and then the badman speak to the importance of liminal space as a cultural practice within the African Diaspora. Writing about the trickster figure Ebony A. Utley (2012) explains that the,

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<sup>88</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983) and Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1982).

trickster mediates the liminal space between heaven and hell, divinity and humanity. The trickster is both disruptive and reconciliatory, profane and sacred, good and evil and thus neither.<sup>89</sup>

The binaries that exist in Western Thought are not emphasized in the African Diasporic practices Gates studies and Utley refers to above. While Western-European traditions are dichotomous in this regard, African Diasporic traditions take a much more integrated approach to cultural meanings.

Further, Anibal Quijano's efforts to re-imagine assumptions about how modernity is constructed are important here as well. Quijano theorizes that modernity is not simply a product that is determined by Western-European values, ideals, and epistemologies; but actually that modernity is a project that is born from the interaction of peoples in the Americas with those of Europe beginning in 1492. In this reading, what we know as modernity is constructed from the original peoples of the Americas, the African enslaved in the "New World", and the European invaders. In this sense, "The Other" is implicated in the project of modernity. Quijano writes:

Therefore, whatever it may be that the term modernity names today, it involves the totality of global population and all the history of the last five hundred years, all the worlds or former worlds articulated in the global model of power, each differentiation or differentiable segment constituted together with (as part of) the historical redefinition or reconstitution of each segment for its incorporation to the new and common model of global power.<sup>90</sup>

In other words, Quijano's work arms scholars with new tools to imagine how peoples normally considered outside of the process of modernity are implicated in this new global model, and how oppressors are affected in turn. Through this model it is appropriate to think about how different

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<sup>89</sup> Ebony A. Utley, *Rap and Religion: Understanding the Gangsta's God* (Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2012), 69.

<sup>90</sup> Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentricism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views From The Global South* 1 no. 3 (2000): 545-546.

peoples, oppressed and oppressors, are mediating hegemonic power in the current environment. With this in mind, my suggestion here is a break away from traditional understandings of oppressor and oppressed as a binary relationship of power and attempt to understand how hegemonic power is mediated between parties. This hegemonic mediation of power is implied in Quijano's work, for if the "Other" is implicated in the project of modernity then marginalized folks are not simply subjects of modernity, but have agency within that system as well.

As Dubious often quoted notion of double-consciousness suggests, black Americans have constantly struggled to understand themselves through the eyes of their oppressors; a necessary skill in a world where a mistake in this regard could result in physical harm, loss of a job, or worse, death. This second-sight, a considerable burden to be sure, also may allow black folk to see the interdependent nature of hegemonic power. Dubious complex metaphor of the veil meant to describe the strict color-line of American society, also allows black folk to have special insight into the inner workings of the racial order.<sup>91</sup>

The position here is not that the "Other" can completely escape hegemonic ideologies that are dominant and insidiously coercive. Rather, that the interdependent nature of hegemonic ideologies allows space for the "Other" to expose the oppositional binaries that uphold such orders. By exposing the interdependent nature of ideological notions of race, gender, and sexuality artists can begin to deconstruct the oppositional binaries hegemonic ideologies depend upon. It is this approach that Herman Gray (1995) suggests when he observes that cultural products that upend "hegemonic character of images rooted in stable heterosexual black

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<sup>91</sup> W. E. B. Dubois, "The Souls of Black Folk," *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1965).

masculinity and essential notions of family and nation”<sup>92</sup> are important to “seeing and experiencing our black male selves differently”.<sup>93</sup>

Roberts helped make clear in the second chapter that the oppressive society that black Americans endured has helped to make complex the delineation between “good” and “bad”. So that behaviors considered “bad” by the white racist regime were considered “good” within black communities because they challenged the unjust and discriminatory laws. In this way the socially constructed nature of “good” and “bad” are made apparent. In marginalized black communities throughout the United States what is outlawed and considered “bad” was often the only viable way to enter the economy, or to fight for human rights. This argument does not mean a dismissal of morality, but is about making clear the challenge faced by black folk who were asked for centuries to follow a moral code and laws that systematically marginalized them from economic opportunities and fulfillment.

It is this approach, a blending of the good and evil, sacred and profane, and broadly the deconstruction of binaries, that is apparent in the work of Big K.R.I.T., Kendrick Lamar, and other artists engaging in emerging masculinities. In this context artists are constantly exploring liminal spaces that call into question dichotomous relationships, and also make apparent the affects social conditions have on the choices individuals have to make. As the title of Lamar’s studio album debut suggest, *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012), he is good, but the city he resides in, the social environment, is unhinged and challenging. Lupe Fiasco’s debut album *Food and Liquor* (2006), a reference to neighborhood corner stores in his hometown of Chicago that sell both products, also combines the good and bad into one entity. Where the “food” represents essential ingredients to sustain human life and “liquor” represents a vice.

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<sup>92</sup> Gray, 404.

<sup>93</sup> Gray, 404.

Mississippi artists Big K.R.I.T., often combines the sacred and the profane in order to make profound insights in how the two spaces are inextricably connected. The cover art of Big K.R.I.T.'s 2011 mixtape *4everNaday* illustrates this dynamic. The drawn image features a young child sitting with its back to the viewer. A church building and a strip club sit off in the distance but above each shoulder of the child. A bible and a bottle of liquor sit on either side of the child. Although the image invokes a dichotomous choice between the evil represented by the strip club and the liquor bottle and good, represented by the bible and the church, songs on the album offer more insight. "Package Store" illuminates good and evil as a liminal space that individual move between rather than fixed ends of a spectrum. The first verse introduces listeners to a preacher who also pays for sex with women and is an alcoholic. However, K.R.I.T.'s verse is not about judging the preacher's bad behavior but instead realizing that all people have the ability for good and evil.

Just the other day when I was out at the store  
Saw a preacher hella creeping, tryna bang on a hoe  
That same motherfucker used to bang on my do'  
Hollering bout donations for cause, cause collections is low

He also raps on the chorus:

In the neighborhood package store, mixing the good with the bad  
Which flavors of life's labor have you had?  
In the neighborhood package store, don't need directions for the gun shop  
It's on the same block of the neighborhood package store

Both these excerpts illustrate how good and bad are unrelated to social status or position, instead that people have both capabilities. Good and evil are not fixed positions, but interact in a fluid state that takes in to account social environments that have real affects on the choices and outcomes of individual lives. The songs I will explore below challenge listeners to move away

from dichotomous thinking that so marks modernity and hegemony; and asks that folks engage with the liminal space of their subjectivity. Black male rappers engaging in emerging black masculinities are challenging hegemonic binaries in at least 3 different ways: by taking on female positionalities, challenging heteronormativity, and challenging gangsta masculinity as authentic black masculinity.

### Male Rappers and Female Positionality

The first example of emerging black masculinities is when male rappers attempt to speak through female positionalities. Hip Hop has long been criticized, and rightly so, for marginalizing women's voices. In mainstream Hip Hop women are generally depicted in roles that only serve the needs of male protagonist. Tricia Rose (2008) writes,

The most visible representations of black women in hip hop reflect the hallmark of mainstream masculinity. They regularly use women as props that boost male egos, treat women's bodies as sexual objects, and divide women into groups that are worthy of protection and respect and those that are not. Thus, hip hop, does not break from the fundamental logic of mainstream masculinity so much as convey it with excess, bravado, and extra insult.<sup>94</sup>

In this way, the mainstream and commercial aspects of rap music have generally marginalized and made the lives of women invisible, and if they are seen or heard at all it is in ways that bolster patriarchy. 2 Chainz (formerly Tity Boy), an Atlanta based rapper's 2012 hit "Birthday Song" is one of the most recent and egregious examples of this practice. The song features Kanye West and asserts that what is most important about women are their physical attributes that make them sexually desirable to men. This point is made lyrically, but visually as well. As in many commercial rap music videos, women appear scantily clad and gyrating their buttocks and bosoms in the camera lens. A women's buttocks also appears as a cake to be eaten, and a woman

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<sup>94</sup> Rose, 2008, 119.

herself appears on a table as cake, her body something to be consumed by others. By reducing a woman's importance to her physicality and its relation to men, 2 Chainz and West assert that women don't own their bodies but they exist exclusively for the pleasure of men. As West and 2 Chainz rap, "Bad Bitch contest, you in first place". Who is judging the contest? It is certainly not women themselves. West and 2 Chainz are the arbiters of what makes acceptable and desirable womanhood. Although Hip Hop is by no means the originator of misogyny 2 Chainz and Kanye West use it to great affect in this song.

Sexist lyrics persist among male rappers even when they have the opposite intentions. Chicago rapper, Lupe Fiasco's heavily lauded "Bad Bitch", on its face, sought to challenge the hypersexual images of black women in mainstream Hip Hop, but offered as a solution a hierarchy of womanhood driven by the politics of respectability. Fiasco's song traces how Hip Hop music teaches black girls to be "bad bitches", sexually aggressive and scantily clad, and black men to expect the behavior associated with the image. In rap lyrics "bitch" is generally used as a term of derision toward women, but also is used to refer to women who are considered sexually desirable. Female and male rappers also use it to emasculate and feminize in order to demean. However, "Bitch" is also used as a term of endearment or empowerment among women, and also as a term of derision. All these meaning turn on the positionality of the user, context of the use, and the perceived intent as registered by the receiving audience. Generally, Fiasco's song misses the mark because it does not speak to the complexities of the words use among women.

Fiasco raps on the chorus: " Bitch bad, women good, lady better...". Although the song attempts to explore and critique the hypersexual nature of representations of black women within Hip Hop, it also leaves no space for women to define their own sexual freedom and womanhood.

Where “bitch” refers to the scantily clad “video vixen” who gyrates suggestively behind the male rapper, the “lady” seemingly refers to a chaste or more sexually restrained womanhood apparently more valued by Fiasco. Although, Fiasco’s song deftly speaks about how black boys and girls learn hegemonic gender norms it offers a solution very much within existing ideology that re-codifies patriarchy rather than challenging it.

There are of course plenty of exceptions especially among a new burgeoning field of female rappers. New York City based artist Nitty Scott, MC whose brand of feminist, community-based, empowered Hip Hop challenges patriarchy and the limited ways women are depicted in rap music. She continually asserts her own agency in her music, “I will tell my fucking story before I let you tell it for me”, she raps. There is also Azaelia Banks, a Harlem based, emcee who’s sexually explicit verses included references to lesbian sex acts and pleasure without a male body. Angel Haze tackles sexual abuse and rape in her songs telling the story of her own sexual assault, recovery, and survival. All these examples, and there are many more, are to highlight a new generation of female emcees pushing back against the heteronormative and misogynistic Hip Hop narratives. These women carry-on the same legacy begun by MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill of earlier generations that voiced their own counter-hegemonic narratives that sought to give voice to female agency. These women are telling their own stories and for their own needs.

The songs I will highlight in this section attempt not to judge or speak for women, but represent attempts by male rappers to speak from a female perspective evoking empathy and understanding. These songs are important because they represent a break from the misogynistic rap narratives where women serve as objects of male desire and those narratives that impose a politics of respectability. Instead, the artists I explore below attempt to tease out the complexity



of womanhood through male voices in ways that do not support patriarchy. One could also read these attempts as another way to marginalize women's voices by embodying them resulting in a further silencing. My reading does not contend that assertion is not also true, but what is of significant here is that in a patriarchal society men would attempt to embody female subjectivity at all, and do so in ways that don't bolster patriarchy but challenge it. These attempts have the affect of disturbing gender binaries crucial to upholding hegemonic norms.

On J. Cole's "Lost Ones", Wale's "Family Affair", and a number of Kendrick Lamar's songs inhabit female positionalities in order to tell stories of abortion, ideals of beauty, heterosexual relationships, and prostitution. These artists reveal themselves to be insightful and introspective towards concern with the female perspective completely lost on many of the most popular rappers of late 90s and early 2000s. Although, embodying female positionalities does not make up for the lack of female emcees on the main stages of Hip Hop, it does however mark a welcomed change in perspective that breaks with misogynistic depictions so prevalent in recent years. In these stories women are presented as complex, defiant, in contention with patriarchy, and struggling against conditions within American urban environments. This three-dimensional story telling from the female perspective transcends the narrow depictions of women in many male rapper music videos and lyrics as only valued for their sexuality, while also challenging the oppositional relationship hegemony assumes between men and women.

Kendrick Lamar's growing catalogue marks him as one of the best examples yet of a male rapper trying to embody female voices. On his acclaimed mixtape *Section.80* Lamar takes on a number of different female positionalities in the opening records of the album to tell a complex story of the prostitution, sexuality, lust, and love. This progression of songs begins with "No Make-up" a song that explores perceptions of female beauty from both the male and female

perspective, highlights violence against women, and the role male gaze plays in defining female beauty. In the male voice Lamar asks rhetorically why a woman is using make-up, as he feels it covers up authenticity. Lamar raps: “You ‘bout to blow your cover when you cover up/ Don't you know your imperfections/ Is a wonderful blessing/ From heaven, is where you got it from”. Here, make-up is a way to cover up reality and obscures the woman beneath. However, this concern does not come from a place of masculine power that seeks to re-define beauty for the sake of male desire, but instead opens a dialogue about the meaning of beauty. The chorus makes this point:

I love the way you  
Put it on your eyes  
The roses on your face  
Light up the sky  
Those lips are colorful  
All of the time  
And girl that's fine  
But I want to know do you mind  
No make-up today (today) (x4)  
And girl that's fine  
But I want to know do you mind

Important is the demeanor of the conversation is not about dictating to women how to understand their beauty, as Lamar acknowledges that he enjoys the make-up while also asking if the female character “doesn’t mind” wearing so much. This is not about controlling female beauty but about empathy and understanding. Lamar continues, “I stand behind her and try to figure her vision of prettiness...” Lamar is attempting to see the woman through her own eyes. What might she see in the mirror when she looks there?

In taking on the female voice in the second verse of the song Lamar conducts a conversation between male and female voices, interchanging two voice to create a dynamic that

explores how women learn normative beauty. In the below verse, the female voice appears in parenthesis.

(I feel like it's not enough)  
(I can never put on too much makeup)  
(Yeah I know) your imperfections  
(I be constantly stressing)  
(From him is where I get it from)  
(They tell me I need to) smile  
(At least once in a while)  
(I hate my lips, my nose, my) eyebrows  
(It's the beauty in me)  
(But what he don't see)  
(Is that I had a black)---

The female character is revealed to be insecure about her body. She locates her frustration in patriarchy, “I be constantly stressing/ From him is where I get if from”. The final word of this verse is bleeped out, but it can be inferred to reveal that the make-up is not only about adhering to patriarchal beauty standards, but also about covering up signs of violence presumably from a male. This information is not obvious to the male character in the song. Overall, by taking on the female perspective in “No Make-Up” Lamar tries to empathize with body insecurity many women endure, an insecurity that Lamar locates in patriarchy.

Presumably the female character in “No Make-Up” is the same woman in the next song in the progression, “Keisha’s Song”. This song is told from an omnipresent third person voice, who watches the tumultuous life of a young prostitute. Throughout the song we learn that Keisha is only 17 and doesn’t want to be a sex-worker, but has learned to compartmentalize what she does in the backseats of cars with men in order to survive financially: “In her heart she hate it there, but in her mind she made it where/ Nothing really matters, so she hit the back seat/ Rosa Parks never a factor when she making ends meet”. However, just as “No Make-Up” locates the

position Keisha is in not singularly to her own pitfalls but holds responsible the patriarchal social conditions under which she endures. Lamar reveals that she was sexually abused by her mother's male lover at the age of 9, and that that "muthafucka is the fucking reason why Keisha rushing through that/ Block away from Lueders park, I seen a El Camino park..." Also patriarchal power is represented in the male police officers that abuse their position of power by offering a clean record for sexual favors from Keisha. In this life Keisha feels trapped within male gaze that the she has normalized.

She suddenly realized she'll never escape the allure  
Of the black man, white man, needed satisfaction, at first  
It became a practice, but now she's numb to it

Keisha's story ends in tragedy. As the song closes we learn that Keisha was stabbed to death in the back of a John's car. In concluding the song Lamar adds that when he completed the song he played it for his 11-year old sister to caution her against the life Keisha founder herself in.

Lamar continues Keisha's story on his critically acclaimed studio debut *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012), particularly the compelling song "Sing About Me" in which Lamar takes on the perspective of Keisha's sister. In this persona Lamar offers a complex rebuttal to "Keisha's Song". The voice of Keisha's sister is defiant about her own prostitution and feels Lamar has judged her sister unfairly. In this voice, Lamar opens a dialogue between black men and women about morality and patriarchy, but also institutional racism and governmental neglect. As in the other songs I have reviewed so far Lamar deftly connects personal choices with the failing of social institutions individuals live within. As Keisha's sister, Lamar raps:

What's crazy was, I was hearing about it  
But doubted your ignorance, how could you ever  
Just put her on blast and shit  
Judging her past and shit

Well it's completely my future  
 A nigga behind me right now asking for ass and shit  
 And I'mma need that 40 dollars even if I gotta  
 Fuck, suck and swallow in the parking lot  
 ...  
 This is the life of another girl damaged by the system  
 These foster homes, I run away and never do miss them  
 See, my hormones just run away and if I can get them back  
 To where they used to be then I'll probably be in the denim  
 Of a family gene that show women how to be woman, or better yet a leader  
 You need her to learn something, then you probably need to beat her  
 That's how I was taught  
 Three niggas in one room, first time I was tossed

Keisha's sister calls Lamar ignorant of the choices her and her sister have had to make and demands that she not judge her or her sister for their actions. Although, she is defiant in her "choice" to be a prostitute she also admits that the reason she is in sex-work is because of the harmful "system" of foster homes that failed her and misogyny that has normalized violence against women. At the end of her song, Keisha is stabbed, and in a symbolic death Keisha's sister's voice is faded away as the verse concludes even as she shouts defiantly, "Don't ignore me nigga". Lamar seems to fear that Keisha's sister will suffer the same fate.

Other songs on *good kid, m.A.A.d city* that are about women are not told from the positionality of a female protagonist. For instance, "Tammy's Song" is told from a distance as Lamar watches Tammy move from one heterosexual relationship to another after her male partner is unfaithful. In the final verse, Tammy eventually ends up in a lesbian relationship. Lamar concludes that this is because she was tired of men being dishonest and did not trust them anymore. Lamar raps,

And so, these girls  
 These vulnerable girls  
 Took they men up

Put them in their world  
Their vulnerable world  
And just like that it was  
Only getting they feelings hurt  
Tell me how that sound?  
They got fed up with the  
Biggest question mark  
They curious now  
Cause when women get sick of men  
They think of a big helping hand  
To lend each other uncover emotions when lights dim  
So when she telling her to come over  
It'll be alright  
The minute she hit the block  
And turn left, she'll be turning dyke, they:

[Hook 3]  
Fuck with other bitches  
When they tired of these niggas  
Fuck with other bitches  
When they tired of these niggas  
Fuck with other bitches  
On the side cause these niggas...

Of course, this is a very narrow and heterosexist way to envision lesbian relationships. Lesbian or gay relationships do not come about because women or men are fed up with heterosexual relationships, but in actuality because they desire lesbian and gay loving relationships. Narratives like the one in “Tammy’s Song” do little to remove patriarchy or heteronormativity, but entrench it further by “Othering” gay and lesbian relationships as a subjectivity only turned to in duress and dissatisfactions with heterosexual relationships.

As normative as “Tammy’s Song” is it also speaks to the way male power allows men to take advantage of women, and criticizes men for using women as objects from which to derive sexual gratification. Like many of the songs we will review here “Tammy’s Song” offers glimpse of counter-hegemonic narratives even as it codifies elements of patriarchy.

Wale's "Family Affair" is also about prostitution and in this song Wale takes on the perspectives of the pimp, a prostitute, and her child. Again, the goal of the song is to give voice to the challenges and choices some women make, but doing so without judging them. Instead Wale speaks with understanding and empathy. Speaking as a mother to her son, Wale raps: "Although the route's foul, we need Similac powder/ Hold on/ Simmer down now/ It's momma's new job that provides temporary housing". Here, Wale relates the self-destructive and difficult relationship a prostitute enters with a pimp out of great duress that combine financial stress and the pressures of American patriarchy.

J. Cole speaks from both male and female perspectives on his song "Lost Ones". He reconstructs a young heterosexual couples argument about an unplanned pregnancy. From the female perspective, J. Cole expresses the anger of a woman who feels that her partner is going to run-out on their relationship, and not take any responsibility for the child. J. Cole raps:

She said "Nigga, you got some nerve to come up to me talking about abortion  
This my body nigga, so don't think you finna force shit!  
See I knew that this is how you act, so typical  
Said you love me oh but now you flipping like reciprocals  
It figures though, I shoulda known that you was just another nigga  
No different from them other niggas  
Who be claiming that they love you just to get up in them drawers

In the songs above male rappers attempt to speak from the female perspective. This approach differs greatly from how the hypermasculinity of the badmen of the toast and ballads and of gangsta rap engaged with women. The adversarial relations between men and women that hegemony maintain is challenged by these artist as they try to understand the difficult choices patriarchy requires of women. As "Tammy's Song" illustrates, these artist are not perfect, but

these attempts challenge the oppositional nature of patriarchy because they ask men to critically interrogate patriarchy's assumed dominant relationship with women.

### Lil' B and Heteronormativity in Hip Hop

In recent years, the Hip Hop community has faced challenges to normative masculinity brought by gay and lesbian subjectivities. Just before his studio album debut R&B singer, Frank Ocean sent a message to fans in which he made public a past relationship with a male lover. Ocean is not exclusively a Hip Hop performer, but is a founding member of the Hip Hop collective Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All, or simply Odd Future, whose young members are a collective of avant-garde shock-rappers. Odd Future's brand of Hip Hop relies on horror, shock value, and often includes obscene, hurtful, misogynistic, homophobic, violent lyrics that push the boundaries of acceptable entertainment. However, their music also opens spaces for non-normative masculinity of which Frank Ocean's revelation is representative. Ocean's public announcement could be read as a publicity stunt that coincided with the release of his debut, but outside even this cynical view, Ocean's announcement was a political statement that resonated across the Hip Hop landscape as a marker of the same changes happening across the American cultural landscape. High profile Artists such as Kanye West and Jay-Z, who had previously worked with Ocean, were neutral if not supportive of Ocean's coming out. Other artists were less supportive largely because of what Ocean's announcement means for "authentic" Hip Hop masculinities and sexuality.

Changes within the Hip Hop community are of course reflective of larger shifts over marriage equality for LGBT folks across the American electorate. Over the past few years national polls have showed a continuing shift in acceptance of marriage equality. The growing



acceptance of non-normative sexualities is a welcomed change, however, the use of hateful language towards gay and lesbian folks persist in Hip Hop lyrics. The persistence of negative language around queer sexualities speaks to the anxiety and paranoia at the heart of hegemonic masculinity.

Within the Hip Hop context, and of course more broadly, hegemonic masculinity has meant to negate homosexuality. Homosexual men are perceived as effeminate, or like women, and are marked by terms such as “sissy”. In this way, gay men are ultimately understood as the quintessential “weak” men. They possess the bodies of men, but are perceived to possess the frailty, weakness, and sensitiveness negatively associated with women. Homosexuality is thus the negation of masculinity, and a hegemonic man must avoid this at all cost.<sup>95</sup>

Rejection of homosexuality has become particularly important within the mainstream Hip Hop context, especially in regards to maintaining an authentic thug and gangsta personas. Michael Jeffries (2009) illuminates the ways in which the gangsta persona has become associated with an “authentic” black manhood and the importance of rejecting homosexuality and perceived feminization within that framework. He writes,

In order to strengthen one’s masculinity in a hegemonic context where masculinities are arranged in a hierarchy according to identity markers including ethno-racial status and sexual preference, subjects who occupy a hierarchical location other than the ideal (straight, white Christian, bourgeois) may adopt a range of strategies...including displaying bravado, highlighting male distinctiveness in feminizes space, and degrading both women and gay men.<sup>96</sup>

Jeffries argues that hostility and rejection of homosexuality within the gangsta rap context moves subjects closer to hegemonic masculinity. “No homo” (read: not homosexual) is a term frequently used by heterosexual male rappers to distance themselves from behavior that could be

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<sup>95</sup> Collins, 189.

<sup>96</sup> Jeffries, 37.

perceived as gay. For instance praising another male rap artist's work might invoke the phrase "no homo" to affirm the heterosexuality of the artist giving praise. Of course the use of this phrase is a defense mechanism that hides anxiety and paranoia that resides at the heart of hegemonic masculinity. The frequent use of "no homo" in online Hip Hop community message boards and day-to-day conversations among men to avoid even the appearance of being gay speaks to the need to affirm membership in a particular masculine and sexual group. In other words "no homo" is meant to make clear distinctions between homosexuality and heterosexuality and maintain hegemonic masculinity.

Of course gay and lesbian Hip Hop artists have long advocated for themselves and pushed back against heteronormative and fixed gender/sexual positions. Through ethnographic work with gay male rappers and rap groups such as Deep Dickollective, D. Mark Wilson (2007) finds that gay male rappers felt ostracized from both white LGBTQ activist communities and heteronormative Hip Hop communities. He argues that black gay rappers, in creating a space for their own self-representation through Hip Hop, "'smash' and 'reconstitute' social identities thought to be opposed to one another: gay identity and hip-hop identity".<sup>97</sup> Through their work Deep Dickollective deconstructs binaries hegemony depends opening up new spaces black masculinities within Hip Hop. Unfortunately gay and lesbian artists, although plentiful and popular in many Hip Hop circles, have not reached the high profile and national popularity of more mainstream artists. Frank Ocean is likely the first male Hip Hop affiliated artist with wide-national appeal that has come out publicly as having engaged in a same-sex relationship.

I will now turn to California rapper Lil' B to illustrate how this artist also break binaries between heterosexual and the homosexual and also between what is considered traditionally

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<sup>97</sup> D. Mark Wilson, "Post-Pomo Hip-Hop Homos: Hip-Hop Art, Gay Rappers and Social Change," *Social Justice* 34 no. 1 (2007): 120.

feminine and male. In 2011 Lil' B released *I'm Gay (I'm Happy)*. Lil' B does not openly identify as gay or bisexual; however, as a male heterosexual rapper the album title alone sent shockwaves through the Hip Hop industry. To be sure this young entertainer depends on word-of-mouth to push his brand, and critics could easily dismiss the provocative name as a publicity stunt. Lil' B himself was aware of the attention the title of the album would elicit in the Hip Hop community. He introduced the album at a performance in Indio, California during the Coachella Music Festival in 2011:

I'm going to do the most controversial thing in Hip Hop and show you that words don't mean shit. I'm going to make an album called I'm Gay, right. Now, I'm going to tell y'all why I'm the first person to do it in Hip Hop and why y'all are the first people to know my reasons. I'm just going to tell y'all. So many people be worried about what people mean and like what definitions of words and shit. First of all gay means happy...I like women I love women. It just shows you no matter what you do it doesn't matter, live life. You only have one life to live. Be happy. Fuck the hating, fuck the hating, fuck the hating.<sup>98</sup>

The reason that naming a Hip Hop album *I'm Gay* is so controversial is because mainstream/commercial Hip Hop masculinities in the last two decades have largely been defined by hegemonic masculinity that prevail on the false notions that homosexuality and "real" masculinity are oppositional. By naming his album *I'm Gay (I'm Happy)* Lil' B challenges this assumptions about masculinity that the dominant norms advance.

While his rap counterparts see a contradiction between Hip Hop masculine identities and gay identities, Lil' B does not. He also feels no contradiction between associating with LGBT community and his masculine subjectivity as a Hip Hop performer. In this way, *I'm Gay* challenges the heteronormative nature of hegemonic masculinity. Complicating things further, however, is the albums subtitle, *I'm Happy*, referring to one of the other dictionary meanings of

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<sup>98</sup> Lil' B announces album title at 2011 Coachella Music Festival. Transcribed from video. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=d\\_Wr3lXU\\_wo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=d_Wr3lXU_wo)

the word gay. In the above announcement and in other media Lil' B says the title refers to the innocuousness of any words meaning. Much like the reclaiming of "nigger" in Hip Hop as term of endearment instead of a racial slur, Lil B's use of the word "gay" in the title suggests a similar motive. In that it is a bid to reclaim the word in such a way as to normalize it and the behavior it is associated with. By focusing on the "happy" definition of the word "gay" Lil B may hope to deem the word itself innocuous along with the sexual orientation of gay and lesbian folks. However, as an outsider to the LGBT community it is difficult to see how successful his re-appropriation is.

It can also be suggested, by qualifying the name of the album with the parenthetical *I'm Happy* Lil' B is succumbing to pressures not to support gay and lesbian folks outright, but instead to hide behind the "I'm Happy" qualifier. However, in a May 2011 interview with CNN Lil' B seemed to understand the implications the name of his album had for sexual and gender norms within the Hip Hop community and beyond:

I call myself the human sacrifice, because I look at it like, no one else is going to do it and push that line for people, and I'm going to do it, and they're going to look at me and say, "Well, you know what? If that guy can do it, I can be myself too, and if that rapper can be himself and be free and happy and still hold masculinity and love people and love flowers and just be happy being alive, well then, I can do that too."<sup>99</sup>

His self-aggrandizing aside, Lil B desires people to be themselves regardless of what others think, and is also clear that he can "still hold masculinity", still be a man, even though his album title associates him with gay and lesbian people. His announcement was met with some skepticism because of the inherent self-serving nature of the music industry and mainstream Hip Hop's general hostility toward queer identities. Is Lil B's goal to actually show solidarity with

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<sup>99</sup> Gavin Godfrey, "Rapper Lil B on 'I'm Gay': 'We're all one people,'" *CNN Radio*, 31 May. 2011. <http://www.cnn.com/2011/SHOWBIZ/Music/05/24/lil.b.album/index.html> (May 2011).

the LGBT community as he says; or is *I'm Gay* just another publicity stunt for an artist that relies heavily on word of mouth to carry his brand throughout the Internet? GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian rights advocacy group voiced their own fears when they responded to the title with cautious praise: "As a lyricist, Lil B knows that words matter. Slurs have the power to fuel intolerance. We hope that Lil B's album title is not just a gimmick, and is really a sincere attempt to be an ally. He has the platform and the voice. We hope he uses it in positive way"<sup>100</sup>. In interviews since the announcement and the albums release Lil' B has been consistent in his message about being a heterosexual ally for the LGBT community<sup>101</sup>. Lil B' denied that the purpose of the album is just to garner attention telling CNN in a May 2011 interview that,

...I did this with the pure intention in my heart to help people, and I didn't do this for promotional reasons. I did because there needs to be someone brave enough to do it, brave enough to speak up and have the right reasoning of doing it.<sup>102</sup>

Along with *I'm Gay*, Lil' B frequently refers to himself as a "pretty bitch", "fag", and a "Lesbian" and in some of his do-it-yourself style music video dons traditionally feminine accessories including long earring and sun hats. In this way, Lil' B creates a contradictory persona that at times affirms and contests hegemonic norms. Ebony A. Utley (2012), rightly points out that Lil' B does not wholly embrace homosexuality evidenced by his frequent use of the term "no homo" and the word *fag* in many of his songs. His songs also frequently include boisterous and explicit raps about heterosexual sex that still marks male and female relationships

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<sup>100</sup> Jesse Gissen, "GLAAD Reacts to Lil B's I'm Gay Album Title," 18 April 2011. *XXL.com*. March 2012. [http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2011/04/glaad-reacts-to-\"gay\"-lil-b-album/](http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2011/04/glaad-reacts-to-\) (March 2012).

<sup>101</sup> Jack Thriller, "This Is 50 Interview with Lil B 'The Based God'". 7 February. 2011. *ThisIs50.com*.  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgSPX8jCV\\_E&list=PLC616F9B4F8A40E0A&index=4&feature=plpp\\_video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgSPX8jCV_E&list=PLC616F9B4F8A40E0A&index=4&feature=plpp_video) (March 2012).

<sup>102</sup> Godfrey, "Rapper Lil B on 'I'm Gay': 'We're all one people,'".

as the desired norm.<sup>103</sup> Utley notes this contradiction in Lil' B persona: "Lil' B's power over women and homophobia are disgusting, but his power to invite conversation about homosexuality and nonnormative masculinity is inspiring".<sup>104</sup> Even as Lil' B reasserts familiar gender and sexual tropes he pushes the boundaries of acceptable masculinity and normative identities. More evidence of this can be found both in his lyrical content and the album art of *I'm Gay (I'm Happy)*.

Although, Lil' B covers a myriad of topics on *I'm Gay* the overall theme is expressed on the album's cover artwork that features an adaption of Ernie Barnes' 1970s painting *Sugar Shack*. Barnes rhythmic and elongated style captures black American dancers swaying and moving to live music in a shack. Lil' B's adaption of the painting splits it into a triptych in which the first two panels feature the black club dancers in chains and are labeled "Slavery", and "Mental Slavery". The final panel is labeled "Mental Freedom" and depicts the walls of the Sugar Shack broken away to reveal black dancers without chains and dancing in the foreground of a modern city backdrop. The overall theme that the adaption espouses, and what is found in the content of the album as well, is one of black freedom from white supremacy, challenging notions of authentic black masculinity, as well as the constraints of commercial or mainstream Hip Hop practices.

Most strikingly Lil' B raps in a self-defined style called "based". The "based" style refers to a stream of consciousness rap that does not necessarily rhyme, and generally avoids song-writing staples such as choruses. Thus far Lil' B is the only practitioner of this style, which he claims represent an authentic, uninhibited voice that allows him to speak on subject matter very dear to him. This style is exclusively used throughout *I'm Gay*. Below is the first verse from

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<sup>103</sup> Utley, 108.

<sup>104</sup> Utley, 108.

“Trapped in Prison”, which is a good example of the “based” style and the theme of freedom advocated throughout the album:

Mental Slavery  
Niggas be hanging off of trees in the woods, like the hood  
It’s more than Martin Luther King, fighting for a dream  
Watch me go against everything you believe  
They disrespect you tryna spark a dream  
Everybody knows it’s easy to fail but hard to think, think twice  
I’m nicer than grandma with a cup of iced tea

Difficult to convey through print is the way in which Lil B ignores common meter, rhyme, and rhythm. He frequently pauses in the middle of lines or verses. This practice makes it unclear whether his material is written prior to recording or is improvised during the recording process. Regardless, the lack of adherence to normative song-writing structure is what Lil’ B is all about. The non-constructed nature of Lil’ B’s “based” rap askew the highly constructed and produced nature of commercial Hip Hop. These events are not simply mistakes of an inexperienced up-and-coming rapper; but rather, the natural inconsistencies of the “based” style give it its importance as a metaphor for challenging normative commercial/mainstream practices within Hip Hop.

Lil’ B presents a much more complicated case. In many of his songs he engages in exactly this type of masculine power especially as it regards to sexual behavior. Songs such as “Ho Suck My Dick” and “I’m Getting Bitches” seem to rehash Lil B as a black male “buck”, and also relay the importance of domination of women sexually as a point of masculine power. These songs don’t seem to offer anything new in terms of the re-imaging of black masculine subjectivity beyond the phallic and corporeal symbols of the buck.

However, verses like the below from “I’m Getting Bitches” forces a reassessment of any initial reading. Below, mixed in with the usual milieu celebrating Lil’ B’s ability to attract women, are lines in which he calls himself a “faggot” and a “lesbian” because he attracts so many women.

I’m getting bitches! Steady getting bitches!  
God come out and I’m snatching all your bitches  
Yes, god damn, I’m a faggot  
I’m a lesbian cause the bitches let me have it  
Riding in the charger, maybe in the magnum  
Maybe in the Scraper siting on sixes!

One reading suggest that these lines are simply tongue-and-cheek and are meant to suggest Lil’ B’s sexual power is so strong he attracts women as easily as he perceives lesbians might. Still further, another reading might suggest Lil’ B is performing a kind of sexual-bending. This later thesis is supported by other songs such as “Imma Eat Her Ass” in whose video Lil’ B dons a traditionally feminine sun hat along with long earrings, a reoccurring accessory in many of his videos. Here, Lil’ B wears decidedly “feminized” clothing and accessories in a song referencing a sexual act not commonly suggestive of masculine power.

Lil’ B is bending gender constructs, but this time through his fashion. Hegemonic masculinity requires a separation of male and female bodies and roles; and in the “Imma Eat Her Ass” music video Lil’ B eschews expectations of masculinity by wearing women’s fashion. This gesture might seem small, but in a genre of music obsessed with demarcating lines between men and women this act becomes full with transgression. Although not wholly outside of the hegemonic sexuality and gender ideologies, Lil’ B gives insight into how dominant norms might be challenged even within oppressive frameworks. Lil’ B does not wholly reject the black masculine “buck” or hegemonic masculinity; however, he does provide space for different



interpretations of black masculinity to emerge by collapsing the binaries that hegemonic systems depend on. In this case, namely, the lines between heterosexuality and homosexuality and between what are deemed feminine and masculine.

### Challenging Hip Hop Gangsta Authenticity

Emerging artists are calling attention to the ways in which the black masculine gangsta subjectivity is constructed and not the default black masculine subject position. This work moves away from the hypermasculine position so important to gangsta subjectivity. Chicago rapper, Lupe Fiasco does just this on his insightful “Daydreamin’ ” on which Philadelphia crooner Jill Scott is also featured. Mocking the pop-gangster posturing, violence, and the use of women as status symbols Fiasco raps,

Now come on everybody, lets make cocaine cool  
We need a few more half-naked women up in the pool  
And hold this MAC-10 that’s all covered in jewels  
And can you please put your titties closer to the 22s  
And where’s the champagne? We need champagne  
Now look as hard as you can with this blunt in your hand  
And now hold up your chain, slow-motion through the flames  
Now cue the smoke machines and the simulated rain

Here Fiasco describes the fabricated nature of the gangsta masculinity particularly how it is constructed on the screen in a music video. He explicitly challenges the myth of the commercial gangsta rapper whose subjectivity is largely formed by violence, women, and status symbols. Furthermore other artist such Lil’ B and B.o.B (also Bobby Ray) of Decatur, GA speak to the ways the gangsta masculinity has over-determined their own subjectivities, limiting the ways they expressed their manhood. On Lil’ B’s “B.O.R. (Birth of Rap)” he raps about the allure of the gangsta image, and in this way, begins to interrogate it as the prime masculine subject

position: “head fucked up, I thought it would be cool to go to prison/ Watching Hot Boyz on BET, getting all these women/ So I got my gold grill because I’m thugged out with’ em”. B.o.B takes up this same narrative thrust on “Generation Lost”:

Everything you do from your shades to your shoes  
From your chains to your coupe  
Came from the tube (read: television)  
Trust me I would know  
I was raised on it too  
...  
I used to wear a grill  
Because it was the trend  
Not because I like it  
I just wanted to fit in  
...  
But I was lost  
I ain’t know who I was  
What else was there to do besides look like a thug

Fiasco, B.o.B, and Lil’ B all call into question the naturalization of the black gangsta masculine subjectivity. By deconstructing their own masculinities in this way they are calling into question the ways in which a particular masculinity has over-determined what it means to be a black male. This type of deconstruction names the artists’ unease with which they deal in dominant Hip Hop masculinities, and also their need to break away from previous constructions. These rapper and others are pushing the boundaries of acceptable expressions of black masculinity within Hip Hop, essentially saying that black masculine Hip Hop subjectivity does not have to be over-determined by commercialized gangsterism. To make this point, B.o.B raps, “So I’mma play my guitar/Rap about aliens and sing about stars/ Until you understand that’s what we are”.

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Awarded to support promising graduate students, the Fairchild Fellowship covers the cost of tuition and provides a living stipend for the first full year of study.

**Dale S. Strohl Grant for Research Excellence in Humanities and Social Sciences • Lehigh University • Bethlehem, PA • 2012-2013**

Awarded to students completing thesis or dissertation research • Provided funds for research at the Tupac Amaru Shakur Collection in Atlanta, GA; Harvard University Hip Hop Archive in Boston, MA; and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York, NY

**Lehigh University Committee on Race and Identity Development • Lehigh University • Bethlehem, PA • Spring 2013**

Served on committee work-shopping training solutions to better equip University staff and faculty with student-oriented solutions to issues of race and identity on campus • Provided professional development training for staff to help address personal issues of racial identity development

**Secretary • Lehigh American Studies Association • Lehigh University • Bethlehem, PA • 2011-2013**

Founding member of Lehigh American Studies Association • Kept accurate written minutes of all meetings • Sent monthly correspondences to group members updating them on event and opportunities • Served as a member of the Executive Board

**Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship • Swarthmore College • Swarthmore, PA • 2006-Present**

This prestigious fellowship is only awarded to students of color showing the most promise to successfully complete research and teach at the graduate level • Provides ongoing support and mentorship throughout ones academic career

**Philly Fellows • AmeriCorps/VISTA • Philadelphia, PA • 2007-2008**

This selective program partners recent college graduates with successful non-profits in the Philadelphia area • Fellows serve as full-time employees in a capacity building position expanding the strength, reach, and goals of their host agency • Participated in monthly professional development events and workshops throughout the year of service.

## Research Experience

### **Research Assistant, Prof. Tanya Saunders (Sociology) • Lehigh University • Bethlehem, PA • Spring 2012**

Collected hundreds of text, video, and recorded interviews of 10 popular Hip Hop performers and producers. • Used Atlas.ti qualitative software to analyze data to find what motivates artist to create their art • Compiled monthly data analysis reports detailing results • Completed annotative bibliography of over 50 sources of the most current published works on Hip Hop

### **Independent study, Prof. James Peterson (English, Africana Studies) Lehigh University • Bethlehem, PA • Spring 2012**

Researched and read materials on gender and sexuality theory • Completed extensive writing on issues of gender and sexuality within the context of the Hip Hop community • Completed annotative bibliography of over 40 sources on issues pertaining to gender and sexuality in Hip Hop

## **Selected Abstracts**

National Association of African American Studies and Affiliates Conference • Baton Rouge, LA • February 11-17, 2013

Paper Presentation: “Lil’ B and Emerging Black Masculinities in Hip Hop”

Tupac Amaru Shakur Collection Conference • Atlanta, GA • September 28-29, 2012

Paper Presentation: “The ABC’s of Being Black: How Middle School Black Students Construct Their Racial Identities Among Culturally Biased Curriculum”

Pennsylvania College English Association Annual Conference • Scranton, PA • April 12-14, 2012

Paper Presentation: “Emerging Black Masculinities in Hip Hop”

## Work Experience

### **Director of Chess Program • ASAP/After School Activities Partnership • Philadelphia, PA 2009-2011**

Oversaw the Philadelphia Youth Chess Challenge – one of the nation’s largest chess communities with 283 chess clubs and 4,250 kids playing weekly • Coordinate the Philadelphia Scholastic Chess League – Philadelphia’s largest School District-affiliated league comprised of 69 elementary, middle and high schools competing weekly • Provided ongoing contact, support and training opportunities for chess coaches • Organized 20+ chess tournaments and special events a year, averaging 200-300 attendees • Arranged for all aspects of events, including scheduling speakers, writing press releases, ordering materials and supplies, renting tables and chairs, and meeting with onsite event contacts • Oversaw outreach and selection of 5-7 annual chess college scholarship recipients (\$1,500-\$2,000 ea.) • Supervised one full-time employee, five part-time tournament directors and 10 rotating volunteers • Secured funding for the Chess Challenge through written grant proposals and assisted with budget creation • Monitored and evaluated ongoing chess programs, providing feedback for grant reports • Reported directly to the Executive Director and President.

### **Chess Coordinator • ASAP/After School Activities Partnerships • Philadelphia, PA 2007-2009**

Managed the day-to-day operations for the Philadelphia Youth Chess Challenge • Organized introductory and advanced trainings for Chess Challenge coaches • Conducted outreach to schools and community-based sites to begin new chess clubs • Evaluated and supported existing chess clubs • Coordinated extra-curricular compensation for school district chess coaches • Assisted with scheduling, organizing and arranging chess tournaments and special events.

**Senior Admission Fellow • Swarthmore College • Swarthmore, PA      2006-2007**

Conducted dozens of interviews with prospective students for the class of 2011 • Prepared interview write-ups assessing academic, personality, extra-curricular, and overall strength and fit of prospective students for Admissions Counselors.

**Multicultural Recruitment Intern • Swarthmore College • Swarthmore, PA      2005-2006**

Organized and facilitated events for prospective and admitted students weekends • Updated database of regional and national minority student recruitment programs • Collaborated with Assistant Admissions Deans, departments, and school offices • Liaison with minority student organizations on campus.

**Teaching Intern • Northfield Mount Hermon School • Northfield, MA      Summer 2006**

Created original curriculum and taught creative writing minor course • Co-taught and developed lesson plans for English Literature major course • Served as residential dorm staff responsible for the well-being of dozens of students.

**Tutor Councilor/Assistant • Upward Bound • Swarthmore, PA      Summer 2005**

Taught as assistant teacher in calculus/trigonometry classes. • Tutored and provided homework assistance to students outside of class • Planned and supervised evening activities for youth • Served as residential dorm faculty responsible creating a safe, social, and studious environment for 8 students on the hall.